

# The Spaces of Kamo-no-Chomei's Record of the Ten Square Feet Hut (Hojoki, 方丈記)

Maggie Leung On Yuk  
University of Hong Kong

## 1. Introduction

Kamo-no-Chomei (1155-1216 A.D.)'s *Record of the Ten Square Feet Hut* (*Hojoki*, 方丈記) was composed in 1212 A.D. and has been regarded as one of the most representative essays (*zuihitsu* 隨筆) in Japanese classics.

The French scholar, Gaston Bachelard, in his famous book *The Poetics of Space*, highlights the spiritual aspect of Chomei's hermit hut and points out that it is a space that "possesses the felicity of intense poverty; ...it is one of the glories of poverty; as destitution increases it gives us access to absolute refuge" (1958, 1964:31). Japanese scholars such as Nakakawa Keiko et al explicate the differences between the mundane living space of 'house (ie) 家' and the super-mundane living space of the 'hermit hut (iori 庵)' in *Hojoki*. They point out that for Chomei, the hermit hut is a realization of spiritual space (1995:321-2) in physical form.

As suggested by the title, *Hojoki*, 方丈記, space is one of the most important themes of *Hojoki*. The work starts off by comparing the never-ending flow of the river to the transience of human life and space of human existence. Chomei's river metaphor reminds one of the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus (500B.C.) who said that everything is constantly changing and nobody can step into the same river twice.

*Hojoki* consists of 12 sections; the first 6 sections depict the natural disasters in Kyoto before Chomei's retreat into the mountain whereas the last 6 sections are accounts of Chomei's secluded life as a hermit in the mountain. Kyoto, as the capital of Japan during Chomei's time, its space embodied both political and cultural significances. However, with the incessant disasters such as fire, tornado, famine, earthquake and political

instability, the supremacy and integrity of the Capital was undermined and the spaces disintegrated and became disordered.

In search of a peaceful and serene space, Chomei decided to retreat into the mountain where he hoped he would be able to attain spiritual tranquillity. However, eventually Chomei realised that he still had not attained the perfect state he had been searching.

This paper will attempt to expound the varieties and meanings of spaces of *Hojoki*, 方丈記 such as the capital Kyoto (city) and the mountain (countryside) and the spiritual and transcendental spaces that Chomei yearned for. The characteristics of space in Japanese culture will also be discussed.

## **2. Kyoto: A space of political power and cultural tradition in disintegration**

Kyoto became Japan's capital in 794 A.D and remained to be so until Emperor Meiji moved to Tokyo in 1868 A.D. In Japanese history, 794 A.D. to 1185 A.D. is the period during which the imperial court in Kyoto was the centre of political power and courtly culture. Kyoto used to be a space of political power that control people and a cultural space that cultivated courtly elegance and artistic refinement. As nothing can remain constant, despite its political and cultural tradition, Kyoto had to confront inexorable changes caused by natural disasters or man-made destructions. After 1185 A.D., political power fell into the hand of the warriors in Kamakura in Eastern Japan, resulting in the shifting of centre of power away from Kyoto.

Kamo no Chomei was born in 1155 A.D. and died in 1216 A.D. It is worth noting that the first half of Chomei's life was in the last three decades of the courtly Heian period while the later half was at the beginning of the Kamakura warrior period. The time when Chomei wrote *Hojoki* (he was 57 years old), the political centre of Japan had shifted into the hand of the warriors in Kamakura although the Imperial seat remained in Kyoto. The first half of *Hojoki* can be regarded as a requiem lamenting the disruption of the elegant and cultured space of the Heian noble court. Chomei starts off *Hojoki* by comparing the constantly changing humans and buildings to the continuous flow of the river. One may say that rivers, humans and buildings are self contradicting existences because despite

that fact that they all assume a concrete external shape, they are forever mutating. The numerous catastrophes happened in Kyoto reflected the lack of stability of Kyoto as a power and cultural centre. The capital Kyoto during Chomei's time was different from that before the 11<sup>th</sup> century when Kyoto was the centre of elegant and refined courtly culture, and also the centre of paramount political power. Towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it became a space in transition and therefore full of changes which resulted in the destruction of humans and buildings. It was no more a place where people looked up to; instead it had transformed into a space of destitution, despair, fear and danger which rendered people felt helpless and desperate. For example, when Chomei lamented the tremendous loss of lives and properties after the big fire in section 2, he observed that 'Everything people do in order to make a living is incredible and irrational and it is useless to spend so much money and make such great effort to build houses in such a dangerous place like Kyoto'.

In Chomei's accounts of the catastrophes in Kyoto, he used a lot expressions relating to 'motion' which underlined changes and mutations. In depicting the big fire of 1177 A.D. and the tornado of 1180 A.D. the expression 'blow' was being reiterated to highlight the motion of the devastating fire and the destructive strong wind. One of the most important changes that occurred was the Central Government's moving of the capital soon after the tornado in 1180 A.D. Although within a few months, the Government returned to the old capital, Kyoto, because the destruction and disruption done had been so enormous and extensive that Kyoto could never resume its former glamour. In the account of the famine in 1181 A.D., there was a small child who did not know that its mother had died already and still clung desperately to the dead mother's breast. This is a picture of life and death, motion and stillness; longing for life and the relentlessness of death. In describing the earthquake in 1185 A.D., Chomei bewailed that 'unfortunately one does not have wings and cannot fly into the sky. If only one can be transformed into a dragon, how one wish one can ride on the cloud and flee' (section 6). The emphases on the motion of fire and wind, the small child's wish for life and the human's wish to fly underline the sense of motion and change. For Chomei, the capital Kyoto was a space that he had to face various natural disasters and human calamities. When he moved to the house he built on the riverbank of River Kamo, apart from having to worry about the possibility of

flooding, he also worried about burglary which made him felt unsettled (section 8). Chomei explained that this house was built according to his own design. However, due to lack of financial resources, the house did not have a main entrance and the place for his carriage was built with bamboo. The incomplete house suggests that Chomei was a person without political or economic influence; he was someone outside the centre of political space as indicated by the location of his house.

As Kyoto was being devastated by incessant catastrophes and was a space where nothing remained constant and people were feeling unsettled and under the continuous threats of various disasters, Chomei, at 50, decided to move to the suburb where he could have more freedom to create and control his living space.

### **3. Ten square feet hut: Individual space**

After moving to the suburb for 5 years, Chomei moved to Mount Hino where he built a 10 square feet hut. This hut was about 0.1% the size of the house where he used to live in Kyoto before he turned 30. Chomei designed the hut and was meticulous about every detail of the interior and external environment. As for the houses he used to live before, he did not give any details about them which suggests that for Chomei the tiny hut was a space completely belonged to him and where he was in absolute control.

The space of the hut was an individual one which contrasted with the colossal space of political power, history, tradition and culture of the capital, Kyoto. In the tiny space of the hut, the existence of the individual and the presence of everything assumed significance and prominence.

The hut was a space created and controlled by Chomei, and he was careful in utilising the limited space effectively. The tiny hut was his bedroom, library, music room and also a place of worship. Moreover, Chomei actively extended his space by making use of the outdoor space such as by building a place for burning wood which enabled him to cook and boil water; using the rock to build a reservoir for preserving water.

Apart from practical purposes, the outdoor space also served for spiritual meditation,

socializing and even entertainment purposes. The natural space outside Chomei's hut was extension of his spiritual and cultural spaces. For example, the expansive area to the west of the mountain valley reminded one of the Buddhist Paradise of the West and served as a space for Zen meditation. The mountain was also a social space when Chomei enjoyed friendship with a young boy of 10.

Through contemplating on the natural sceneries around, Chomei was able to connect himself to famous poets and writers of ancient Japan and China. In doing so, he created a cultural space that transcended time and national identity.

Unlike in Kyoto where nature seemed to be connected with disasters like tornado, earthquake and drought, nature in the mountain was spiritually enhancing and physically energising. The seasonal changes and living creatures were stimulating. Life in the tiny mountain hut was austere yet more humane. The plants and fruits from the mountain were Chomei's source of daily sustenance. His hands were his servants while his legs were his carriage. Chomei pointed out that one felt better carrying out daily chores by oneself rather than making great effort to command the others to work for us (section 10). He had high regards of manual labour which he said was good for improving our health. Chomei's abstemious and ascetic way of life in the tiny hut 800 years ago might provide some stimulation and food for thought to some 21<sup>st</sup> century environmentalists and health conscious people.

The tiny hut was Chomei's world and Mount Hino was his universe. Here, we can see the intricate relationship between the individual and space. If we can effectively utilise space in a creative way like Chomei, the actual physical size is no more of any significance; through imagination, linkage and creativity, a tiny space like Chomei's hut may be transformed into a boundless space and free world.

In contrast with the enormous political and forever mutating space of Kyoto, Chomei's tiny hut is a serene and tranquil space where the individual is in control and can attain oneness with nature.

#### **4. Ideal and transcendental space**

Living in the hut created by himself in Mount Hino, Chomei felt like a fish inside the water. His quiet tiny hut was his supreme treasure (section 11). However, as a devout Buddhist disciple, he contemplated that it might be sinful to be so fond of his hut which after all was a mundane material object. He even began to worry that his enjoyment of

his solitary and serene state might become an obstacle to his salvation and transcendence to the Buddhist Paradise after he died (section 12). Here, we can see that Chomei could not find genuine gratification in the mundane space where he enjoyed individual solitude and tranquillity; he was searching for an ideal and transcendental space where he could be free from earthly concerns and human follies. The tiny hut, was not, as some critics have suggested, an embodiment and realization of the spiritual space that Chomei yearned for. It was a space where he was in complete control and can attain oneness with the natural environment. However, as Chomei lamented, the cosiness of the hut might be a hindrance to the attainment of ultimate celestial bliss. The ultimate space that Chomei longed for was an ideal and transcendental space which most probably was unattainable.

#### **5. Conclusion: Characteristics of space in Japanese culture**

One of the most renowned critics in 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan, Kato Shuichi, in his book *Time and Space in Japanese Culture*, explicated that time and space in Japanese culture emphasizes ‘now’ (Kato, 2007:15-42) and ‘here’ (Kato, 2007:137-182). In *Hojoki*, the account of the various catastrophes in Kyoto and Chomei’s hermit life in the mountain bore a distinct and strong sense of immediacy and vividness. The space of Kyoto and the tiny mountain hut are spaces of ‘here’. However, it is interesting to note that when one is in the ‘here’ space, whether one is satisfied with it or not, one always tends to yearn for another space, an ideal and transcendental space.

While living in the capital Kyoto which was a ‘here’ space where Chomei felt unsettled, he always longed for some places where he could feel like a fish in the water. After building the tiny hut in Mount Hino, he regarded it as his treasure. However, Chomei felt

Maggie Leung On Yuk: The Spaces of Kamo-no-Chomei's Record of the Ten Square Feet Hut (Hojoki, 方丈記)

guilty in feeling cosy in this solitary and peaceful space. The ultimate ideal space that he yearned for was a transcendental space which was beyond 'here' and most probably inaccessible. This space reminds one of 'the sublime' explicated by philosopher Tsang Lap-chuen. According to Tsang, 'the sublime is not something out there to be directly represented. It is concerned with life-situations construed in such a way that they evoke in us an awareness of the limits of our powers and abilities, and the importance of reaching or even transcending those limits as conceived' (1998: 37).

**Reference:**

Bachelard, Gaston (1958, 1964) *The Poetics of Space*. (Trans.) Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press.

Kato Shuichi (2007) *Nihon Bunka ni okeru Jikan to Kukan (Time and Space in Japanese Culture)*.

Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten.

Tsang Lap-chuen (1998) *The Sublime: Groundwork Towards a Theory*. New York: University of Rochester Press.

中川景子等(1995)「『方丈記』『徒然草』における建築と都市空間」、『北海道1995年8月日本建築学会大会学術講演梗概集』。321-2頁。

安良岡康作(1980)『方丈記：全訳注』。東京：講談社。