THE JAPANESE ART OF LIVING WITH LITTLE · 02

KAMO NO CHŌMEI

Hōjōki

方丈記

The Ten-Foot Hut



On living with less in a housing and wealth crisis

New translation and essays by

JULIAN DELPHIKI

Thinking School

Hōjōki: The Ten-Foot Hut

On Living With Less in a Housing and Wealth Crisis

Julian Delphiki

Hōjōki: The Ten-Foot Hut

On Living With Less in a Housing and Wealth Crisis

A new translation from the classical Japanese, with notes, and eighteen essays by

Julian Delphiki

Thinking School

Copyright page

Hōjōki: The Ten-Foot Hut. On Living With Less in a Housing and Wealth Crisis

Translation, notes, essays and all other text in this edition © Julian Delphiki, 2027.

Hōjōki (方丈記) by Kamo no Chōmei (c. 1155-1216), written in 1212, is in the public domain. This translation was made from the text in *Kokubun taikan: Nikki sōshi bu* (Tokyo: Meibunsha, 1906), as transcribed by Aozora Bunko (no. 975).

First English edition: 2027. Published by Thinking School.

Also available in Spanish as *Hōjōki: una cabaña de tres metros*.

All rights in the original material of this edition reserved.

The river flows on and never stops, and yet the water is never the same water.

Kamo no Chōmei, *Hōjōki* (1212)

Contents

- I. Prologue: A Hundred Square Feet and a Question
- II. Context: Chōmei and Kyoto, 1155-1216
- III. The Text: *Hōjōki*, by Kamo no Chōmei
- IV. Essays
  - 1. The Hut Is Not a Housing Plan
  - 2. The Houses Went Down the River
  - 3. It All Fits on Two Carts
  - 4. How Long a House Lasts
  - 5. Inheritances Nobody Wants
  - 6. The Deposit
  - 7. Foam on the Water
  - 8. Smoke from the Hearths
  - 9. The Armoured House
  - 10. A Window to the East
  - 11. Living Alone

  - 12. The Warden's Boy
  - 13. The Hut with Wi-Fi
  - 14. My Hands Are My Servants
  - 15. I Play Alone
  - 16. Catalogue Minimalism
  - 17. Sixty Years, a Hundred Square Feet
  - 18. Temporary Hut
- V. Counterpoints
- Chosen or Imposed: Eighteen Questions
- VI. Epilogue: What You Can Do With a Hundred Square Feet
- VII. Further Reading
- VIII. A Note on This Edition
- About the Author
- Also by Julian Delphiki

I. Prologue: A Hundred Square Feet and a Question

This book is about how living with less became advice given, above all, to people who already have little. It tells the story through a text written eight hundred years ago in a hut ten feet by ten, by a man who had lost several houses before he built the last one.

In 1212, a man of about fifty-seven finished writing a short text in a hut ten feet by ten, on a hillside south-east of Kyoto. He dated it "around the last day of the third month" and signed it with his name as a monk, Ren'in. He gave it a title that is a measurement: *Hōjōki*, something like "Notes from a *jō* square". In other words: what I wrote in about a hundred square feet.

Eight hundred and fourteen years later, housing has become the issue that will not go away in most of the rich world. In the United States, according to Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies, a record 22.7 million renter households were cost-burdened in 2024, paying more than 30 % of their income for a roof, and the typical existing home sold for nearly five times the typical household's income.

In England, the median home cost 7.6 times median full-time earnings in 2025. In the UK, 28.7 % of people aged 20 to 34 were living with their parents, up from 25.4 % a decade earlier. In Spain, where this book was first written, housing

has topped the national list of worries in every monthly government survey since December 2024.

This book puts the two things side by side. Not because Chōmei has the answer to the housing crisis, which he does not, but because he is, as far as I know, the first writer to put the house at the centre of a reflection on how to live. Not family, not love, not war, not God. The house.

How it burns, how the wind carries it off, how it is taken apart and floated down a river, how it is sold as firewood in a famine, how it collapses in an earthquake. And how, after losing several, a man can end up in a hundred square feet asking himself whether he has found peace or lost his mind.

Why this text

Hōjōki is very short. In this translation it runs to about forty pages, and you can read it in an afternoon. In Japan it is a school classic: almost everyone knows the first sentence by heart, the one about the river that never stops flowing and whose water is never the same. Outside Japan it is less known, and usually read in one of two keys. Either as a Buddhist text on impermanence, which it is. Or as the Japanese ancestor of minimalism, which it is not, or not quite.

What I propose here is a third reading, which does not cancel the others. *Hōjōki* is a book about housing. About what it means to have a house in a dangerous city, to lose it, to be unable to afford another, and to build the next one knowing

it will go too. Read that way, it is more current than much of what is written on the subject today, because it promises nothing.

Why now

There are two reasons, and neither is cheerful.

The first is the housing crisis. When something becomes impossible, people look in two places: to politics, and to resignation with good taste. This book looks with suspicion at the second, which is why it begins with a text people usually read as praise of renunciation.

The second reason is disaster. In thirty years Chōmei lived through a great fire, a whirlwind, the forced removal of the capital, two years of famine with an epidemic on top, and an earthquake with three months of aftershocks.

We have lived through a pandemic, floods that killed more than two hundred people in a single afternoon in Valencia in October 2024, and the January 2025 fires that destroyed more than sixteen thousand buildings around Los Angeles. The feeling of living in a fragile world is not an invention of the media. Chōmei describes it with startling precision, and adds something the media do not say: that a year later, no one remembers.

I first read it while travelling, during a gap year spent going round the world. Reading about a man whose belongings fitted on two carts while I moved from one country to the next

had something of a mirror in it. That year changed me, and so did the book, and I still could not say which weighed more.

What is in this book

First, a short **context**: who Chōmei was, what twelfth-century Kyoto was like and what happened next.

Then **the text**: a new translation from the classical Japanese, with footnotes on names, places, allusions and measures. I have not copied or adapted any modern translation. In some difficult passages I compared the sense with an English version from 1905 that is now in the public domain. Doubtful passages, with their alternatives, are explained in the note on this edition.

Then **eighteen essays**. Each takes an idea from the text and sets it against a problem of today: unaffordable housing, disasters, small houses, how long a house lasts, inheritances, the family money that decides who buys, holiday lets, evictions, the fear of losing one's home, digital life, living alone, the rural dream, remote-working nomads, the hands that serve us, hobbies nobody pays for, catalogue minimalism, old age and renting. They are not commentaries. They are arguments with Chōmei, sometimes for him and sometimes against.

All the essays ask, one way or another, the same two questions. First: what you have, or lack, did you choose it or was it handed to you? Living with little by choice and

living with little by necessity look alike in photographs and in nothing else. Second: who holds the key? The land, family money, the landlord, the law or the algorithm. Chōmei chose his hut, but only after losing the others.

The essays can be read in order or by thread:

- **The house** (what it is, how long it lasts, who owns the ground): 1, 3, 4 and 18.
- **Who has it** (inheritance, family help, holiday lets, evictions, old age): 5, 6, 7, 8 and 17.
- **Fear and flight** (disasters, locks, the countryside, the nomad): 2, 9, 12 and 13.
- **Living inside** (the screen, solitude, other people's hands, hobbies, minimalism): 10, 11, 14, 15 and 16.

At the end of the book, the eighteen closing questions are gathered on a single page.

Then some **counterpoints**: the strongest objections to Chōmei, and to me.

And finally an **epilogue** with no advice in it, a **reading list** and a **note on the edition**.

What is not in it

There are no lessons. There are no "ten keys to living with less". Each essay does end with a question to take away. It is not advice: it is the question the essay leaves open, as Chōmei leaves his own open. There is no invitation to head for the hills,

give everything away or find inner peace. Chōmei himself, at the end of the book, suspects that his peace is just another attachment. It would be odd for a book about him to sell it.

What there is, is a question Chōmei asks halfway through the text and never answers. I put it here so the reader can carry it along: "Where can one settle, and what can one do, to give this body shelter even for a while and the heart a moment's peace?"

It still has no answer. But at least we know the question is old.

II. Context: Chōmei and Kyoto, 1155-1216

The priest's son

Kamo no Chōmei was born around 1155 (some sources say 1153) as Kamo no Nagaakira. "Chōmei" is the Sino-Japanese reading of the same characters, the one used for monks' and poets' names. He was the second son of Kamo no Nagatsugu, chief priest of the Shimogamo shrine, one of the two great shrines of the Kamo family, in the Tadasu forest where the Kamo and Takano rivers meet in northern Kyoto.

It was a good start in life. The Shimogamo priesthood brought court rank, income from estates in many provinces and a place in the city's most famous festival. Everything suggested the boy would inherit his father's post.

He did not. His father died while Chōmei was young and the post went to another branch of the family. Chōmei stayed on in his paternal grandmother's house, lost it some years later for reasons the text leaves unclear, and in his thirties built himself a much smaller house near the river.

Poet and musician

Meanwhile he made a name for himself in other ways. He studied Japanese poetry (*waka*) with the monk Shun'e, and the biwa with court masters. He was good enough for the retired Emperor Go-Toba, a passionate poet, to appoint him in 1201 to the Bureau of Poetry (*Wakadokoro*), which was

compiling the imperial anthology *Shin kokinshū*. Some of his poems went into it.

Go-Toba liked him. When the priesthood of the Kawai shrine, a dependency of Shimogamo, fell vacant, he wanted to give it to Chōmei. The Kamo family objected: the post belonged to someone else. Go-Toba then offered him a new shrine. Chōmei turned it down. Around 1204, at about fifty, he took Buddhist vows and withdrew to the valley of Ōhara, north of the city.

That is the version usually told. *Hōjōki* tells it differently, with no names or posts: it says only that after many setbacks he understood how thin his luck was and left his house. That is the only way to read the book: as the account of someone the world said no to several times, until in the end he said no himself.

The city that was falling apart

The Kyoto of Chōmei's youth was the capital of a system coming undone. For three centuries the Heian court had governed through ritual, poetry and control of land. By the mid-twelfth century real power was passing to the warrior families. The Taira, led by Taira no Kiyomori, dominated the court. In 1180 war broke out with the Minamoto; it ended in 1185 with the destruction of the Taira and, soon after, the founding of a military government at Kamakura, far from Kyoto.

The disasters in *Hōjōki* happen against that background, though Chōmei hardly mentions it. The great fire of 1177 burned a third of the city and destroyed palace buildings that were never rebuilt. The whirlwind and the move of the capital are from 1180: Kiyomori took the court to Fukuhara, his base in present-day Kōbe, and had to bring it back to Kyoto six months later. The Yōwa famine, 1180 to 1182, coincided with the war and worsened it. The earthquake is from 1185, the year the Taira fell.

Chōmei does not talk politics. But the attentive reader sees politics on every page: in the move decided far away, in courtiers dressing as warriors, in the scramble for estates in the south-west (Taira country) rather than the east (Minamoto country), in the nostalgia for ancient emperors who forgave taxes.

The hut at Hino

After some years at Ōhara, around 1208, Chōmei moved to Mount Hino, south-east of Kyoto, and built the hut one *jō* square. There he wrote *Hōjōki*, finishing it in the spring of 1212. In 1211 he had travelled to Kamakura and met the shōgun Minamoto no Sanetomo, himself a poet.

In the same years he wrote a treatise on poetry, the *Mumyōshō*, and a collection of Buddhist conversion stories, the *Hosshinshū*. He died in July 1216, probably at the hut in Hino.

Today there is a replica of the hut in the grounds of the Kawai shrine, inside the Tadasu forest: the very shrine whose post he was denied. It sits under a protective roof, with a hearth in the middle, and you can see it for free. It is an irony he would have enjoyed.

A book with a model

Hōjōki did not come from nowhere. Chōmei had before him a text from 982, the *Chiteiki* ("Record of the Pond Pavilion") by Yoshishige no Yasutane, which also describes the capital, its misfortunes and the house the author builds to retire to. Chōmei takes the structure and turns it inside out: Yasutane builds himself a house in the city with a garden and a pond; Chōmei ends up in a hundred square feet on a mountain.

The other model is religious. According to Buddhist tradition, the wise layman Vimalakīrti lived in a cell one *jō* square, in which, thanks to his wisdom, thousands of beings could fit. The name *hōjō* comes from there and later came to mean, in Japan, the quarters of a temple's abbot. Chōmei chose the measurement knowingly. At the end of the book he compares himself to Vimalakīrti and finds himself wanting.

Afterwards

Hōjōki was copied many times and in several versions. The oldest surviving copy is a manuscript of 1244 kept at the Daifukukō-ji temple, which some scholars have taken for Chōmei's own hand; others doubt it. There is also a longer,

slightly different tradition (the *rufubon*), which is the one printed in modern times and the one translated in this book. The differences are small and explained in the notes.

The text entered the Japanese school curriculum and has never left. It was first translated into English in 1891, by a twenty-four-year-old student, at the request of his Scottish professor, James Main Dixon. The student was Natsume Kinnosuke, who as Natsume Sōseki would become the greatest novelist of modern Japan. In 1905, Frederick Victor Dickins and the naturalist Minakata Kumagusu published another version under a title that stuck: "A Japanese Thoreau of the Twelfth Century".

After the earthquake and tsunami of March 2011, *Hōjōki* was read again in Japan as a book about the present. It is sometimes called the first work of disaster literature. It is also, I think, the first about housing.

III. The Text: Hōjōki, by Kamo no Chōmei

A new translation from the classical Japanese. Section titles are added by this edition; the original runs on without breaks.

1. The river

The river flows on and never stops, and yet the water is never the same water. The foam on its still pools breaks here and gathers there, and none of it lasts for long. So it is with the people of this world, and with their houses.

In the jewel-paved capital[1] the houses of the high and the low stand ridge by ridge and vie with one another in their roof tiles, and they seem to go on from age to age without ending. But look into it and ask whether it is true, and you find few houses that were there before. Some fell to ruin (or burned)[2] last year and were rebuilt this year; some great houses have come down and become small ones. The people who live in them are the same. The place has not changed and there are still crowds of people, but of twenty or thirty I once knew, barely one or two are left. To die in the morning and be born in the evening: that is the way of the world, and it is exactly like foam on water.

I do not know where they come from, the people who are born and die, nor where they go. Nor do I know for whose

[1] *Tamashiki no miyako*, "the capital paved with jewels": a poetic epithet for Heian-kyō, today's Kyoto.

[2] The base text says "fell to ruin"; a variant recorded in the same edition says "burned". Both are given.

sake they torment themselves over these lodgings on the way, or what it is that pleases their eyes. The master and his house compete in impermanence like the dew and the morning glory.[3] Sometimes the dew falls and the flower stays; but though it stays, it withers in the morning sun. Sometimes the flower fades and the dew is still there; but though it is still there, it will not see the evening.

2. The great fire

In the forty-odd springs and autumns since I came to understand things, I have seen a good many strange things in the world.

It was, I think, the twenty-eighth day of the fourth month of the third year of Angen.[4] A fierce wind was blowing and the night would not settle. Around the hour of the dog,[5] a fire broke out in the south-east of the capital and spread to the north-west. In the end it reached the Suzaku Gate, the Great

[3] *Asagao*: in Chōmei's time the name covered flowers that open at dawn and close soon after; today it means the morning glory. The image is the length of one morning.

[4] Angen 3, fourth month, 28th day of the lunar calendar: the fire of 1177. Chōmei himself hedges ("I think").

[5] About 8 p.m. The day was divided into twelve double hours named after animals; the hour of the dog runs roughly from 7 to 9 p.m. The courtier Fujiwara no Kanezane's diary puts the outbreak a little later, at the hour of the boar, about 10 p.m.

Hall of State, the Academy and the Ministry of Civil Affairs,[6] and in one night all of it was dust and ash.

They say it began at Higuchi-Tominokōji, in a shack where a sick man was lodging.[7] Driven this way and that by a wind that kept changing, it spread out like an open fan. Houses far off were choked in smoke; close by, the wind pressed the flames flat against the ground. Ash was blown up into the sky and lit by the glare, and in that red that covered everything, tongues of flame torn off by the wind flew through the air and leapt a block or two[8] at a time.

Who could keep his wits in the middle of it? Some were overcome by smoke and fell; some were blinded by the flames and died on the spot. Others barely escaped with their lives and could not bring anything out. The seven treasures and ten thousand jewels[9] all turned to ash where they lay. What was the cost? That time, sixteen houses of high nobles burned; of the rest, no one knows the number. In all, they

[6]Suzaku Gate: the southern entrance to the palace compound. Great Hall of State: the *Daigokuden*, the hall for the grandest ceremonies; it was never rebuilt. Academy: the *Daigakuryō*, the school for officials.

[7]Higuchi-Tominokōji: a crossroads in the south-east of the city. The base text says "a sick man"; the oldest manuscript (the Daifukukōji-bon) says "dancers", entertainers lodged in a shack. Contemporary records support the second reading.

[8]*Chō*: a block of the Heian-kyō grid, about 120 metres (roughly 130 yards) on a side.

[9]A Buddhist set phrase for "every kind of wealth".

say, two-thirds of the capital went up. Several thousand men and women died;[10] horses and oxen beyond counting.

Of all human undertakings, every one of them foolish, none seems to me so utterly pointless as spending your fortune and fretting your heart to build a house in so dangerous a city.

3. The whirlwind

Then, around the twenty-ninth day of the fourth month of the fourth year of Jishō,[11] a great whirlwind rose near Nakamikado and Kyōgoku and blew with terrible force as far as Sixth Avenue.[12] It swept across three or four blocks, and of the houses inside its path, large or small, not one escaped damage. Some were laid flat in one piece; of others only the beams and pillars were left. It tore gates off and set them down four or five blocks away; it blew down fences and made one yard of two neighbours' gardens.

Not to speak of what was inside: everything a house held went up into the sky, and the shingles of cypress bark[13] whirled like winter leaves in a gale. It raised the dust like smoke so

[10] The base text says "two-thirds" of the city and "several thousand" dead; the Daifukukōji-bon says "one third" and "several dozen". Historians accept one third of the city.

[11] 1180. The day (the 29th) appears only in the base text.

[12] Nakamikado-Kyōgoku: a crossing in the north-east of the city. Sixth Avenue (*Rokujō*) lies some four kilometres (two and a half miles) to the south.

[13] *Hiwada*: roofing of Japanese cypress bark, used on well-to-do houses.

that nothing could be seen, and the roar was so great that no one could hear a voice. Even the wind of karma in the hells,[14] I thought, could be no worse. Not only were houses lost: countless people were hurt or crippled while they were mending them. The wind moved off to the south-west[15] and left a great deal of grief behind it.

Whirlwinds are common enough, but one like this? It was no ordinary thing. I began to suspect it was a warning of some kind.

4. The capital that moved

In the sixth month of the same year the capital was suddenly moved. No one had expected it. As I had heard it, this city had been the capital since the reign of Emperor Saga,[16] some centuries before. It was not a thing to be changed lightly and for no special reason, so people grumbled and fretted, and with more than good cause. But it did no good. Beginning with the Emperor himself, every minister and high noble moved to the new capital in Settsu Province.[17] Of those who served at court, who would stay behind in the old city?

[14]The wind which, according to the sutras, blows in the hells, driven by the evil deeds of the damned.

[15]Literally "towards the sheep and the monkey", i.e. south-west.

[16]Saga reigned 809-823. The capital was actually fixed at Heian-kyō in 794, under his predecessor Kanmu; Chōmei repeats what was said. The point stands: nearly four centuries as capital.

[17]The base text says "the capital of Naniwa", and the edition itself notes that other manuscripts lack these words. The new capital was Fukuhara, in today's Kōbe, the seat of Taira no Kiyomori. Translated as "the new capital" to avoid misleading the reader.