

Writing About Trauma and Disasters – An Analysis of Hōjōki

Hairong He^{1,a}

¹Shanghai Foreign Language School, Shanghai 200083, China

^a13661969167@163.com

ABSTRACT

Hōjōki is a Japanese classic composed by Kamo no Chōmei in the early Kamakura period. The first part recounts the traumatic experiences of disasters in Chōmei's early life, and the second part depicts his life in seclusion in his late years. This paper summarizes previous research that approaches Hōjōki as a religious artistic text, and provides new insight by introducing models in cognitive psychology and psychoanalysis to reinterpret Hōjōki as Chōmei's attempt to work through trauma.

Keywords: *Hōjōki, Kamo no Chōmei, recluse literature, trauma analysis, cognitive psychology*

1. INTRODUCTION

Known as the culmination of Japanese recluse literature, *Hōjōki* (方丈記) was composed by Kamo no Chōmei in the early Kamakura period. Kamo no Chōmei used to be a prestigious court poet working in the Bureau of Poetry, but he took the tonsure, left the capital, and became a Buddhist hermit at the age of forty-nine. In the first fifty years of his life, he went through a tumultuous period of the change from aristocratic Heian to Kamakura shogunate, when he experienced the Genpei War between the Minamoto and Taira families and devastating natural disasters simultaneously. These events and consequent hardships likely had a traumatizing effect on him, and this traumatic memory was revealed in *Hōjōki*, which he wrote at the age of 57 as a recluse. The first half of *Hōjōki* recounts five natural and man-made catastrophes that hit the capital Kyoto in his twenties and communicates the Buddhist message of *Mujō* (無常), the impermanence of life, while the second half describes his life as a hermit in the ten-foot-square hut in Mount Toyama in Hino.

Previous research on *Hōjōki* has addressed the text's Buddhist connotations and literary origins. Scholars have proved that several literary works have impacted the theme, style, and construction of *Hōjōki*, including Buddhist text *Vimalakīrti Sutra* (維摩詰經), poems and proses of Po Chu-I (白居易), and *Chiteiki* (*Record of the Pond Pavilion* 池亭記) by Yoshishige Yasutane (慶滋保胤). Heated debate has been focused on whether Chōmei,

as a hermit, attained enlightenment or was still trapped by mundane attachment. While the first part of *Hōjōki* depicting disasters has long been considered evidence of the Buddhist *Mujō*, few have treated this part as a record of traumatic experience that Chōmei as an individual is struggling to work through.

In this paper, I would first approach Chōmei as a writer and Pure Land Buddhist. By summarizing previous research and giving my own close reading of *Hōjōki*, I illustrate how he conveys the religious message of impermanence through different literary styles to the audience. Then, I would give the author more individual depth. By applying psychological models, I interpret the writing of *Hōjōki* as Chōmei's attempt to work through the traumatic experiences.

My primary source is the English translation of *Hōjōki* by A. L. Sadler. I have also consulted secondary sources from the field of both literature and psychology. In the field of literary criticism and history, the book *Writing and Renunciation in Medieval Japan: The Works of the Poet-Priest Kamo No Chōmei* written by Rajyashree Pandey contextualizes Kamo no Chōmei and his works and summarizes the established theories on *Hōjōki*. In the field of psychology, the book *The Recursive Mind: The Origins of Human Language, Thought, and Civilization* by Michael C. Corballis explores the functions of memory retrieval and cognition, while the journal article "Literature and the Repetition Compulsion" by Sacvan Bercovitch explains Sigmund Freud's model of repetition compulsion and its relationship to literature. They have

helped me establish the psychological framework to analyze Chōmei's process of working through trauma.

I argue that through the writing of Hōjōki, Kamo no Chōmei reenacts the traumatic experiences of disasters and attempts to get over them. In the recount of the disasters, he activates episodic memory to reconstruct traumatic experiences, almost as a form of repetition compulsion, whereas in the record of his life as a recluse he seems to unconsciously filter out unwanted information, a case of belief perseverance that suggests his limited transcendence.

2. WRITING FOR AN AUDIENCE— HŌJŌKI AS A RELIGIOUS-ARTISTIC TEXT

As hermit literature, Hōjōki has been argued to be written purely for self-satisfaction, as Chōmei described in his life as a recluse, *"I have little skill in verse or music, but then I only play and compose for my own amusement, and not for the ears of other people"* [1]. However, according to historical evidence, before his seclusion, Chōmei was a prestigious court poet and his poems and literary works had a broad audience. He participated and excelled in plenty of poetry contests. As a diligent member of the Bureau of Poetry his poems were adopted by *Shinkokinshū* (新古今和歌集), the compilation of the imperial anthology of poetry, and *Senzaishū* (千載和歌集), part of the waka canon. His literary talent was even appreciated by the cloistered emperor Go-Toba [2]. In seclusion, in 1211, a year before Hōjōki was written, Chōmei made a journey to Kamakura with the poet Masatsune, who had been his colleague in the Bureau of Poetry, which proves that he kept in contact with his poet fellows [2]. Admittedly, there is a lack of direct evidence of the first publication and circulation of Hōjōki in the early Kamakura period. However, because Chōmei had already established a broad audience for his poetry, it is justifiable to assume that Hōjōki was not written entirely for self-relief, but targeted at the same audience, namely those who were suffering in the mundane world.

As a writer and Buddhist teacher, Kamo no Chōmei writes about disasters and trauma to illustrate the impermanence of life. He thereby rationalizes his choice to convert to Buddhism, and appeals to the audience to free themselves from worldly attachments. Self-conscious as an author, Kamo no Chōmei adopts different writing styles to convey the religious message. His initial didacticism endows Hōjōki with the character of an aphoristic Buddhist text, whereas his use of pathos in the disaster narrative makes Hōjōki a vivid memoir.

2.1. Didactic style

A didactic style pervades the beginning of the piece. The famous opening sentence of the piece starts the

lesson Chōmei wants to give with an abstract and general overview of his observation of the evanescence. He communicates his belief in the impermanence of life by recording the continuous experiences of disasters and vicissitudes. *"This year falling into decay and the next built up again, how often does the mansion of one age turn into the cottages of the next?"* [1] While human habitation seems a stable sanctuary, in reality, it does not last long: the ebb and flow in nature endows it with a fragility that is indiscriminate to luxurious mansions and cramped cottages. The rhetorical question instructs the audience to see through the appearance and understand suffering as inherent in human condition, irrespective of one's place in the social hierarchy. As Chōmei extends his argument of impermanence from habitations to dwellers, he makes natural transition to contemplations in the Buddhist context: *"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"* [1]. The image of "dew" to illustrate the evanescence traces back to famous lines in *Diamond Sutra*: *"Because all conditioned dharmas are like dreams, phantoms, bubbles, shadows, like dew, or again like lightning—in this way should you view them"* [3]. Moreover, *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, which is explicitly referred to in Hōjōki, also has similar lines echoing the theme: *"This body is like a mass of foam that is intangible. It is like a bubble that does not last long... It is like a dream... a shadow... an echo... a floating cloud . . . lightning"* [4]. No matter which sutra Chōmei was inspired by, the Buddhist connotation is abundant. The debate on dew and flower focuses on two symbols of perishability, so no matter which withers or dissipates first, the conclusion strengthens Chōmei's lesson of the Buddhist Mujō, the impermanence of life.

2.2. A narrative style

The narrative style is prevalent in the vivid delineation of five natural and man-made disasters (the fire in era Angen, the typhoon in the era Jisho, the movement of the capital, the famine of the era Yowa, and the earthquake in the era Gen-ryaku), full of animated detail and rhetorical devices. Highly expressive language makes it reminiscent of a disaster report and lively memoir. Chōmei's description of the earthquake paints a magnificent picture of the catastrophe that almost drags the audience into the desperate scene: *"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. The rocks broke off and rolled down into the valleys, while the boats at sea staggered in the swell and horses on land could find no sure foothold"* [1]. The parallel of images including the crumbling hills, overwhelming sea, and split earth gives a panoramic view of potent primitive natural forces out of control, and the collapse of the foundations of order brings desperate horror as if the end of the world is approaching. While the close-up shot of the staggering

boats and panicked horses conveys that the struggle of human force is like throwing straws against the wind. The combination of a panoramic picture and close-up shots allows the audience to insert themselves into the confrontation with the disasters and understand the vanity of human struggle in the face of the formidable nature.

Moreover, by borrowing the descriptions of catastrophes in *Ōjōyōshū*, an influential medieval Japanese Buddhist text, Chōmei places the audience into a Buddhist world view. He links the miseries of disasters in the secular world to the Defiled Realm in Pure Land Buddhism. In describing the famine, Chōmei mentions “*scraps of firewood fragments with red lacquer and gold and silver foil still sticking to them*” [1], and attributes the fragments to statues and utensils in the mountain temples stolen by starving people to sell as fuel. This makes a clear reference to the first chapter of *Ōjōyōshū*, “Loathing the Defiled Realm”, which states that those who burned the Buddha’s images and took the Buddha’s properties would fall into the Hell of Repetition [5]. Chōmei gives an even more vivid description of the Defiled Realm in *Hōjōki* by portraying the struggling of people in disasters. This connection strengthens the Buddhist appeal he wants to convey.

Chōmei depicts ordinary people as forgetful and avoidant in response to the disasters: “*when the months go by and then the years, we do not find them making mention of such views anymore*” [1]. It is justifiable as people want to thrive and pursue their dreams in the secular world, while it is only Kamo no Chōmei who confronts himself with the cruel reality of the fleeting life and decides to free himself of the worries and attachments. The contrast between the author and others helps him establish his authority as a teacher: only Buddhist detachment leads to enlightenment. Naturally, he claims his indifference to the human civilization, validates of the Buddhist idea of impermanence, and justifies his choice of seclusion. With the teacher’s authority established, directly addressing the suffering audience, Chōmei writes, “*I feel compassion for those who are still bound by the attraction of earthly things*” [1].

3. WRITING FOR HIMSELF—HŌJŌKI AS AN ATTEMPT TO WORK THROUGH TRAUMA

Giving more individual depth to the author, I find that Chōmei writes about disasters and traumatic experiences in an attempt to work through them, set aside his role as a prestigious writer and a Buddhist teacher. The past shapes the person we are today; despite the fact that Chōmei became a hermit leading a serene life, the traumatic experiences of trauma leave him struggling with upsetting emotions and memories, influencing his recounting and writing. The introduction of

psychological concepts would shed light on the inner world of Chōmei working through trauma.

3.1. Reliving the traumatic memory of disasters

In the first half of *Hōjōki*, Chōmei seems to be retrieving the traumatic memory of over thirty years ago. He was in his twenties when the disasters hit the capital, whereas when he wrote *Hōjōki*, he was at the age of fifty-seven. The time lapse should have obstructed him from remembering each detail as clearly as he reproduces in the piece. For example, he depicts minute details in the catastrophes, such as “*red lacquer and gold and silver foil*” [1] and rolling rocks and staggering boats if we revisit the quotes in the previous section.

Viewed in the light of cognitive psychology, Chōmei’s obsessive recalling of the traumatic memory of disasters is predominately a reconstructive rather than reproductive process. There are two forms of declarative memory, semantic memory and episodic memory. Semantic memory means memory for general factual knowledge and concepts, which allows us to recognize objects and use language, while *episodic memory* involves personally experienced events associated with a particular time and place. Chōmei’s memory of experiencing and witnessing disasters in a particular time and space falls into the category of *episodic memory*. The *episodic memory* was classically demonstrated by the British psychologist Sir Frederic C. Bartlett to involve active construction [6], which means that reliving the past does not mean to exactly reproduce the remembered part of the experience in one’s mind, but to actively reconstruct a relatively integrated memory by filling in the intermittent memory gaps, sometimes to the detriment of veracity. In the process, people may even unconsciously confuse imagined events with those that actually happened because the hippocampus in the temporal lobe responsible for memory retrieval also engages in imagination. In *Hōjōki*, the extent of detail included in the recount of the five devastating disasters that cannot be achieved without obsessive reconstructing and reliving the traumatizing memory. In this case, *episodic memory* is combined with aspects of semantic memory to make up *autobiographical memory* [7]. It is worth revisiting Chōmei’s reference to the “Defiled Realm” in *Ōjōyōshū* discussed in the previous section. The memory of the “Defiled Realm” is Chōmei’s semantic memory because it is a concept he knows. As he elaborates on the concept of “Defiled Realm” in *Ōjōyōshū* to spread a Buddhist message, *Ōjōyōshū* also enables him to reconstruct the memory even more vividly. Thus, the distinction between memory and fiction blurs. Indeed, when Chōmei uses language as a device to communicate his memories of traumatizing calamities, elements of both memory and fiction play a role, in accordance with how memory works in cognitive psychology.

After knowing how memory works, it is worth questioning **why Chōmei obsessively activates episodic memory to reconstruct and relive the traumatic experience**. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, the purpose is to actively master the trauma via confrontation with reality. Sigmund Freud explained this in his development of the model: *repetition compulsion*. Freud first established the *Pleasure Principle*, which argues that it is the desire for instant gratification, or pleasure, that governs and motivates people to behave in the unconscious world. However, later evidence from dreams and children's games contradicted the principle because the dreams and games were profoundly reality-oriented: their pattern and purpose signified a refusal to withdraw into illusory gratification. Freud adjusted his theory by adding *the Beyond Pleasure principle*, where *repetition compulsion* belongs [8]. *Repetition Compulsion* suggests "an unconscious need to reenact early traumas in an attempt to overcome or master them, and such traumas are repeated in a new situation symbolic of the repressed prototype" [9].

Not only does the minute detail of disasters in Hōjōki require industrious reconstruction, the recurring elements in the descriptions of the five disasters also suggest the existence of a prototype of trauma to be repeated in different situations. This makes Chōmei an appropriate case of *repetition compulsion*. While the disasters of fire, typhoon, capital relocation, famine, and earthquake appear diverse, the descriptions of human suffering share common themes including the collapse of habitations and displacement of refugees. The fire burns the palaces of the distinguished and houses of lesser people into ashes, the typhoon "[blows] household treasures up into the air" [1] and renders people lamed and hurt in trying to repair the house, and the famine forces people to "break up their own cottages and take the pieces into the city to sell" [1]. As if all disasters stem from a single prototype of trauma that brings miseries to people, Chōmei's obsessive recount of one after another is out of unconscious *repetition compulsion* that has driven him to relive the traumatic experience obsessively to master them.

However, it is difficult to define whether such writing is conscious or unconscious. Indeed, a written sample is not necessarily the authentic reflection of one's inner world, which brings limitations to the application of psychoanalysis that deals with the subconsciousness. Another interpretation of the purpose of obsessive recalling is that Chōmei consciously adopts the Buddhist strategy already prevalent in Kamakura Japan. It is a Buddhist practice to revisit the trauma, look directly at what tortures him, understand that it stems from one's inner world instead of the outside world, and eventually liberate oneself and achieve the goal of Nirvāṇa (涅槃). As a Pure Land Buddhist, Chōmei should have been

aware of the available Buddhist strategy and was likely to use it to cope with his traumatizing memory.

3.2 *Leading life as a recluse*

Shifting our focus to the second half of Hōjōki that depicts Chōmei's life as a recluse, we can see that Chōmei declares his seclusion as a tranquil, self-sufficient, and lighthearted life detached from the traumatizing world. However, close reading of the text proves that unconsciously Chōmei filters out unwanted information, which might constitute a case of *belief perseverance*.

Chōmei draws a correlation between Chōmei's advancing age to sixties and the gradual shrinking in the size of his habitation to a ten-foot-square hut, a hundredth of the house where he spent his middle years. Thus, he shows his natural progression from attachment to detachment. Each season he has distinct activities: in the spring "the clusters of wisteria shining like the purple clouds" resembles "the purple clouds on which Amida Buddha comes to welcome his elect" [1], and "in winter the snow as it piles up and melts seems like an allegory of our evil Karma" [2]. The choice of images with Buddhist connotations proves the enlightenment Chōmei has gained in his life as a hermit. The traumatizing attachment to the past and the mundane world which obstructs his entrance to the pure land seems to be dissipating.

However, while the hut is his sanctuary and shelter, it is not a Utopia because it is still grounded in the secular world. A quote from Hōjōki sheds light on the difficulty to maintain the boundary between the outside world and the hut: "By occasional tidings from 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..." [1] Heaven and Earth do not act from any wish to be benevolent; the disasters are still taking place here and there, dealing with people's life as the dogs and grass are dealt with. The overwhelming "tidings" carrying people's deaths have reached Kamo no Chōmei despite the fact that he lives as a recluse in such a remote mountain and "understand[s] how remote [he] is from the world" [1].

Adopting a religious idea and practicing as instructed by the sutras do not simply lead to the enlightenment as is described in the sutras. There is an enormous leap from the adoption of a Buddhist idea to reaching the ideal state of Nirvāṇa. In the way, psychology provides insight into how one's mind operate to approach the religious goal. In cognitive psychology, the concept of *belief perseverance* sheds light on Chōmei's inner world. *Belief perseverance* means the tendency to cling to one's initial belief even after receiving new information that contradicts or disconfirms the basis of that belief [10]. The "clusters of wisteria" and the melting "snow" are proof of his belief in the attainable Buddhist enlightenment that Chōmei desperately looks for in his serene life as a recluse, while

the positive evidence is not all information that Chōmei receives. The “tidings” of news of death still approaches him, the lamentation of all human beings over the frailty of life conveyed by “shrilling of the Evening Cicada” still echoes around his ears, and the memory of old friends and deceased parents still lingers in his mind. Except for the very few lines depicting the contradictory information that insinuates the everlasting impact of trauma and obstructs the way to enlightenment, Chōmei unconsciously filters out the evidence that would disprove his belief in his right track to detachment. He clings to his belief in his successful liberation from past traumatic experience, but he cannot completely control his mind and continues to be susceptible to mental suffering.

Outside the ten-foot-square hut, suffering of worldly existence never ceases. Inside the ten-foot-square hut, Chōmei leads a peaceful life as a hermit, with after tremors of trauma haunting him in his way to enlightenment. It is exactly the stark contrast between the outside and inside world that proves his transcendence over trauma to be a limited one.

4. CONCLUSION

After we dive into Chōmei’s memory, cognition, and trauma, it is worth asking the last question: **why does Chōmei write down his trauma and his choice to retire from the world?** Many Buddhist scholars have focused on the tension between Buddhist enlightenment and artistic pursuit. Some argue that Chōmei’s profound attachment to poetry, literature, and music contradicts his aspiration for enlightened transcendence. They support their argument by stating that Buddhism requires him to shun all clinging to the world of phenomena. Others claim that the conjunction of nature, music, and poetry are conducive to the attainment of Buddhist enlightenment. Chōmei himself also has an ambiguous attitude toward it. He seems lackadaisical in keeping the Buddhist Precepts and prioritizes the Buddhist goal of liberation rather than the strict principles of the practice. At the same time, he also questions himself whether his leisure activities of music and literature are “useless pleasures” holding him back from the religious path. In other words, whether he has “*put on the form of a recluse while yet his heart has remained impure*” [1]. All prior debate has been focused on the question of whether the tension leads to attachment or detachment. However, from the perspective of trauma, both Buddhism and artistic expression are means for working through trauma and seeking salvation in the tumultuous context of medieval Japan.

Nevertheless, the use of psychological methodology to approach classic literature has limitations. First and foremost, psychological theories are hypothesized, tested, and proved in North America and Europe after the 19th century, while Kamo no Chōmei was born in

medieval Japan. I acknowledge that the models are particular and premodern people’s minds might operate in a different way, bringing limitations and unfitness. Second, it is difficult to define whether writing is conscious or unconscious. If the artistic religious intention of the author outweighs the authenticity of the content in Hōjōki, the psychoanalysis model of *repetition compulsion*, which dives into the unconscious world, does not survive investigation. Taking that into consideration, I include two ways of interpretation of Chōmei’s obsessive recalling, the psychoanalytic one and the Buddhist one, complementary to each other. Last but not least, psychological models do shed light on the understanding of Kamo no Chōmei as an individual and his attempt to get over trauma, while this innovative perspective cannot be taken alone separated from other literary, religious, and historical perspectives. For example, the self-introspection of whether Chōmei achieved Buddhist detachment in the conclusion of Hōjōki is open to interpretation from various perspectives. Using the psychological model of belief perseverance alone oversimplifies the struggle of Chōmei as a Buddhist between the enlightened mind and the deluded mind from a religious perspective.

In conclusion, psychological concepts and models provide new insight into Chōmei’s Hōjōki, for it reveals trauma as the driving force behind the composition of the text. In the recount of the disasters he has experienced in early life, he activates episodic memory to repetitively reconstruct traumatic experiences as an instinct to overcome them, evidenced by repetition compulsion; in the record of his life as a recluse in late years, he seems to unconsciously filter out undesirable information, a case of belief perseverance that suggests his limited transcendence. Ultimately, his decision to write down everything in Hōjōki, including the traumatizing disasters and tranquil life of seclusion, provides a reconciliation between his artistic pursuit and religious belief. Arts and religion both function as a strategy to get over trauma. By integrating psychology into literary and religious studies, we can weave a more comprehensive picture of the narrative voice, reflecting not only Chōmei’s literary persona but also his true self.

REFERENCES

- [1] Sadler, A. L. *The Ten Foot Square Hut and Tales of the Heike: Being TWO Thirteenth-Century Japanese Classics, The "HOJOKI" and Selections from the "Heike Monogatari"*. Rutland (Vt.): Charles E. Tuttle, 1994.
- [2] Pandey, Rajyashree. "Kamo No Chōmei: Court Poet and Buddhist Priest." In *Writing and Renunciation in Medieval Japan: The Works of the Poet-Priest Kamo No Chomei*, 56-81. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998. Accessed July 29, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.18546.6>.

- [3] Watson, Burton. "The Diamond Sutra." *The Eastern Buddhist*, NEW SERIES, 41, no. 1 (2010): 67-100. Accessed August 15, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26289589>.
- [4] Pandey, Rajyashree. "The Sukimono as Recluse: Hōjōki." In *Writing and Renunciation in Medieval Japan: The Works of the Poet-Priest Kamo No Chomei, 139-72*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998. Accessed July 29, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.18546.9>.
- [5] Tian, Yunming. "On the Relationships between 'Kankyo (a Quiet Life)' and the Pure Land in The Hojoki." *Foreign Literatures*, no. 3 (2017): 145–60. <https://doi.org/10.16345/j.cnki.cn11-1562/i.2017.03.017>.
- [6] Bartlett, F. C., and Cyril Burt. "Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology." *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 3, no. 2 (1933): 187–92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1933.tb02913.x>.
- [7] Corballis, Michael C. *The Recursive Mind: The Origins of Human Language, Thought, and Civilization*. Princeton University Press, 2014.
- [8] Bercovitch, Sacvan. "Literature and the Repetition Compulsion." *College English* 29, no. 8 (1968): 607-15. Accessed August 2, 2021. doi:10.2307/374564.
- [9] "American Psychological Association (APA)." American Psychological Association. American Psychological Association. Accessed September 20, 2021. <https://www.apa.org/>.
- [10] Roy F. Baumeister, *Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, Volume 1, 109