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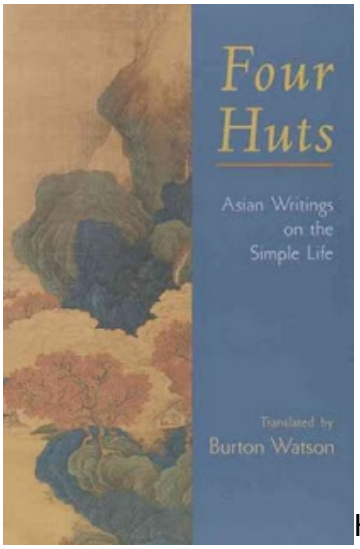
Four Huts: Asian Writings on the Simple Life



How did people live long ago? What qualities were essential to the idea of home in classical China and Japan? Did people aspire to a simpler life even before the invention of engines, computers, and electricity? Finally, does a life lived simply promote happiness? This slim volume answers all of these questions.

Burton Watson, who has taught Chinese and Japanese literature at Stanford, Columbia, and Kyoto universities, translated this volume. The four writers included are: Po Chu-i, Kamo no Chomei, Yoshishige no Yasutane, and Matsuo Basho, who was famous for popularizing the art of haiku. The first was a Chinese poet; the other three were all Japanese writers. One was also a musician. Most made their living by serving as government officials. In both China and Japan during the time span these works cover (between 817 and 1690), government officials were the most educated and literate members of society.

As the title implies, most of the homes were basic, even self-built. Yasutane's was the exception--he lived in a huge house with outbuildings; however, like the others, he still aspired to an ascetic lifestyle. Most important to each dwelling was a view, a small collection of extremely valuable books, and a connection with nature. The writers described their homes through the seasons.

One component that several mentioned was how music made their dwellings feel complete. Because most of these men lived alone, this meant that they were the ones playing music. This is interesting to consider in this time of iPods with virtually any kind of world music available with a touch.

Buddhism and Taoism influenced these essays. Often the writers reflected on the impermanence of their dwellings as well as their lives. Kamo no Chomei lived during a time period of rapid change. Unlike his predecessor, Yatsutane, he wrote in Japanese rather than

classical Chinese. The samurai culture was just beginning, and he mentions how the local ruler commanded the capital to be relocated. Some of the gentry moved their belongings on oxcarts, but the new generation raced past on swift horses. Chomei also recorded a series of disasters that struck Japan in the 12th century: whirlwinds, epidemics, fires that destroy great swaths of cities, and earthquakes.

Chomei also said,"The hermit crab prefers a little shell because he knows the dimensions of his own body." So many centuries later, what these great writers teach us are the importance of small things: the warmth of sun on a wooden floor, a pile of books, music playing, and cool fresh air pouring in through the windows.

If you want to read a contemporary book on the nature of home, try Bill Bryson's At Home: a Short History of Private Life [1].
For the Love of Reading[2]Information, Answers & Reviews [3]Essays [4]Four huts : Asian writings on the simple life [5]Home & Garden [6]

Posted by Dory L. on Mar 21, 2011

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