



## Speaking to animals: Japan and the welfare of companion animals

Citation:

Atherton, Cassandra and Moore, Glenn 2016, Speaking to animals: Japan and the welfare of companion animals, *Electronic journal of contemporary Japanese studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, Article number: 1.

URL: <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/eicjs/vol16/iss1/atherton.html>

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# Speaking To Animals

## Japan And The Welfare Of Companion Animals

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Volume 16, Issue 1 (Article 1 in 2016). First published in [ejcs](#) on 30 April 2016.

### Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenal popularity of companion animals in Japan, and the way many of these pets are treated as part of the owner's family. Indeed, some pets are treated as if they *are* human children. This pet phenomenon was made possible because the Japanese developed a way of seeing their companion animals in anthropomorphic terms, more similar than different to humans. First, this paper describes how this notion has its roots in the Japanese receptivity to the idea that humans and animals can communicate with one another, and the folkloric belief that animals can assume human form and speak. Second, the article details how these ideas and beliefs were consistent with both major Japanese religions, and were sustained in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by literature and, most recently, anthropomorphic characters in anime and advertising. Finally, the paper argues that there is an anthropomorphic paradox in Japan, whereby the identification of companion animals as possessing human qualities leads to the mistreatment of animals rather than an ethically superior response to animal welfare. While animals benefit materially from being thought of in human terms, being well fed and given the best veterinary care, paradoxically, they can lead miserable lives. Being wheeled in baby strollers and being dressed in designer clothes means that pets have their instincts curbed, and raises questions about the ethics of animal ownership.

**Keywords:** animal welfare, anthropomorphism, animals in anime, Japanese animal myths, language and animals, metamorphosis, pet ownership, Japan.

### Introduction

Every morning Seiji Taniguchi goes about his rounds at his Sankyu Bokujo animal sanctuary. One by one he feeds the nineteen "residents," giving each a morning greeting with their breakfast. Haru, a shy akita, gets a chin rub, and he watches while Momo, a Japanese macaque who was found abandoned on a nearby mountain, rushes up to her morning tray of nutmeg flavoured sweet potatoes. "Momo, is it good?" he says. The macaque squeals happily, before returning to her meal (Kawashima, 2012, n.p).

This scene symbolises the paradox of animal welfare in Japan. On the one hand, Taniguchi's decision to leave his successful manufacturing business to care for animals, and the warm, very personal relationship he develops with them—even talking with them—is an example of the great regard and respect many Japanese have for their animals. This is reflected in the fact that there are now more companion animals than there are children under the age of fifteen in Japan, and that many receive the love and care normally given to children (Leonard, 2009, p. 160). On the other hand, some Japanese don't treat their companion

animals well, necessitating the need for Sankyu Bokujo and other animal shelters. However, while there are instances of dogs being left outside in all weather, cats and dogs being abandoned when they become inconvenient, and sometimes cases of outright cruelty, the more common problem is that the love showered on animal companions is expressed in inappropriate ways, ending up causing them harm.

The irony here is that being thought of in human terms has actually contributed to animals' mistreatment. Some Japanese, especially young women, treat their dogs like human children, dressing them and wheeling them in strollers, and Perry McCarney points out that "Many in Japan's younger generation are opting for companion animals instead of children, at least initially" (qtd in Linzey, p. 30). These companion animals eat the best food available, and receive the best veterinary care (*The Guardian* June 8, 2012). Indeed, the coddled dogs being wheeled through fashionable Tokyo shopping districts in baby strollers are well fed, but they are not permitted to run free and play with the wild abandon that animals love (Scott, 2013, n.p). They gain weight, become weak, and as animal rights campaigner Elizabeth Oliver argues, their owners "love them to death" (Oliver, 2014, n.p). In a final, sad irony, some people are so attached to their companion animals that they try to have their vet stave off death as long as possible, even when quality of life has diminished to the point where the animal is miserable (Scott, 2013, n.p).

This paper argues that the paradox of Japan having millions of loving companion animal owners, yet so many mistreated animals, traces back to a long standing Japanese way of thinking about animals which allows owners to anthropomorphise their otherwise non-human animals. This will be referred to as the anthropomorphic paradox in Japan, whereby the identification of companion animals as possessing human qualities leads to the mistreatment of animals rather than an ethically superior response to animal welfare. The significance of this study comes from the importance of analysing anthrozoology, or the study of social relationships between humans and other animals, as a response to environmental crisis and wellbeing. It extends the research undertaken on human-pet interactions and relationships by A. L Podberscek, E.S Paul & J. A Serpell in their *Companion Animals and Us: Exploring the Relationships Between People and Pets* who argue, "We are who we are as much because of our relationships with non-human animals as because of the human ones, and we do ourselves a great disservice—and probably great harm—by denying and ignoring this" (Podberscek, p. 2).

This is not a comparative study; therefore, the similarities and differences between Japan and other nations will not be explored. It also does not consider attitudes towards farm and wild animals, with which most Japanese have an abstract or at least distant relationship. The focus is on companion animals—in particular, cats and dogs living with humans. Companion animals are the most protected category of animals in Japan. The 1973 Law for the Protection and Management of Animals was amended in 1999 and the definition of 'companion animals' changed from 'dogs and cats' to 'home animals' which includes those kept at schools and in shelters (McCarney, p. 30). The relationship between companion animals and their humans is often close, and this paper examines how this relationship is influenced by the Japanese conceptualisation of animals inhabiting the same spiritual plane as humans. For many companion animals, this is the basis of a well cared for, happy life, and demonstrates the way in which Japan can be viewed as ethically advanced in its approach to companion animals. However, this paper will argue that instead a paradox exists whereby anthropomorphising companion animals can result in them being forced to live as substitute children and making life miserable for some unfortunate cats and dogs.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first discusses the historical development of the idea of animals and humans being more similar than different in order to demonstrate the way in which the Japanese cultivate close relationships with their companion animals. This begins with a discussion of the receptivity of the Japanese to the notion that meaningful communication, or as Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, Don D. Jackson and Bill O'Hanlon argue, 'analogic' communication, between humans and animals can occur (p. 44). This leads to an analysis of Japanese folklore, where animals move from this analogic to digital communication when they acquire the power of speech. Folkloric tales of animals who can speak and attain human form were consistent with Japanese religious beliefs, and, as Margaret Sleeboom has suggested, gave the Japanese a basis for believing that animals and humans are connected in a "lateral relationship" (Sleeboom, p. 48). This section argues that the relationship in Japan between

companion animals and humans has its origins in history and folklore, where communication is prioritised.

The second section analyses the endurance of Japanese folkloric and religious beliefs about animals into the twentieth century. It begins with the perseverance of the concept that animals could think very human thoughts in the transition from oral tradition to modern literary forms, such as the novel. This section illustrates how anime and advertising kept the idea of animals with human qualities and abilities in the Japanese consciousness. It ends with an example of the creation of a modern day myth, in which a cat with very human abilities works as a stationmaster, to argue that Japanese relationships with animals are centred on anthropomorphisation.

The third section discusses the conditions under which Japanese companion animals live, and how the attribution of human qualities has not always guaranteed them happy lives. Believing that meaningful communication between humans and animals can take place and that humans and animals inhabit the same spiritual plane has meant that companion animals are often treated as part of their human family. They are loved and they get the best food and medical attention, but being treated as human children rather than as animals has meant that their lives are at best limited and at worst miserable. This unintentional form of animal cruelty is the great Japanese anthropomorphic paradox.

## **Part 1. The Historical Development of Blurred Boundaries Between Humans and Companion Animals**

The notion that humans and animals can communicate with each other in some meaningful way is a powerful argument in favour of the broader notion that animals are intelligent, have complex emotions, and deserve the protection of the law. The problem is that although owners might be convinced that their cat or dog understands what they say, animals can't speak, so there is always an element of interpretation in gauging their response. Getting past this skepticism requires accepting the significance of non-verbal communication. Watzlawick et.al argue, "Pet lovers are convinced that their animals 'understand' their speech. What the animal does understand, needless to say, is certainly not the meaning of words, but the wealth of analogic communication that goes with speech" (p. 44). Indeed, animal behaviourists are convinced that non-verbal communication between humans and animals is possible if the human has the knowledge and patience to make it work. According to the American Humane Society, this requires recognising how cats express mood and intent. "Mood signs" can be erect ears for happiness, flattened ears for a cat that is frightened or angry and swiveling ears meaning that the cat is on alert (Humane Society, n.p). Similarly, Stanley Coren has explained how dogs also use body language to express emotions and to communicate with one-another, and how they recognise similar human gestures (Coren, 2001).

Accepting that meaningful communication between human and animal can occur is easier when people first accept that human non-verbal communication is also possible. In this regard, the Japanese are advanced in their understanding of communication between animals and humans because their history has taught them to appreciate the significance of the subtlest gestures and even silences themselves. Indeed, as Joy Hendy points out, "A child learns to perceive the world through language, spoken and unspoken, through ritual enacted and through the total symbolic system that structures and constrains that world" (p. 53). The hierarchical nature of Japanese society, where people are cautious about overstepping their rank, the stress put on teamwork and harmony, which probably has its roots in Japan's rice-based economy, and even the influence of Zen Buddhism, have all contributed to a complex conversation etiquette in which people are careful not to speak out of turn, and where gestures and silences convey meaning (Hendy, p. 96). For example, in business, Japanese negotiators work as a team, with each member knowing how the other will react. Boye De Mente has called this *anmoku no ryokai*, or "knowing without being told." In private conversation the Japanese take a similarly measured approach in the interests of harmony. As Ishii and Bruneau explain, this is aimed at "keeping contentious ideas silent" (1994, p. 250). It important to note, however, that in Japan, silences do more than limiting conversations, keeping them safe. Silences enhance and clarify verbal communication. The animator Miyazaki Hayao has

furnished a useful explanation. Gaps in animated films—or indeed in conversations—are called *ma*, and Miyazaki explained their importance to a Western interviewer by clapping. “The time in between my clapping is *ma*,” he explained. “If you have non-stop action with no breathing space, it is just busyness” (Miyazaki interview, 2002). McCarney applies this specifically to Japanese attitudes towards animals, arguing, “*Ma* influences all aspects of Japanese culture including religion, politics, and economies, through its defining of what is appropriate... this is particularly significant in the Japanese attitude towards companion animals, free-living species, and the natural world” (p. 29).

Another Japanese word for silences is *chinmoku*, which contains the idea that silences themselves convey meaning. A well-placed silence can indicate agreement or disagreement, and can indicate attitude, thoughtfulness and mood. In their discussion of *chinmoku*, Roger Davies and Osamu Ikeno explain that “what is important and true in Japan will often exist in silence rather than in verbal expression” (2002, p. 52). As a result, rather than automatically equating the inability of a cat or dog to speak as proof that the animal lacks intelligence, the Japanese, attuned to the importance of silences, understand that a dog or cat might communicate with body language or with its eyes. The anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, has shown that these silent communications such as “intention movements and mood signs of animals are analogic communications by which they define the nature of their relationships, rather than making denotative statements about objects” (qtd in Watzlawick, p. 44).

The idea that spoken language does not give humans a monopoly on intelligence and emotion has far reaching implications for animal welfare. As the British anthropologist Margaret Sleeboom has shown, rather than ranking humans above animals in a rigidly hierarchical relationship, “the Japanese regard themselves as laterally connected” (p. 48). An important point Sleeboom makes is that this lateral relationship between humans and animals includes the many Japanese gods, with all three sharing the same world, and with “slippage” possible between the three categories. This slippage relates to the impermanence that is an integral part of the broader Japanese belief system. This reflects a people who had to come to terms with the possibility of natural disasters—earthquakes, tsunami, and fires. It overlaps with and is reinforced by Buddhism, and is woven into the Japanese language (Craig 1998, p. 593). When the word for animal, *dōbutsu*, is written in kanji, 動物, the two characters separately mean “moving” and “form” (Otomo 2011, p. 389). This malleability is expressed in folklore and various Japanese cat myths. For example, some Japanese once believed that when cats turned seven years of age they acquired the ability to understand human speech (Ebihara 2012, p. 137). Such folklore beliefs formed the basis of more complex, exotic myths about cats. One was the *bake-neko*. It was believed that some cats—especially ones with long tails—turned into *yokai*, or supernatural creatures, at age twelve. The cat’s tail would then split into two, the cat would stand erect on its hind legs, and speak. In some cases, it would actually assume human form, but all *bake-neko* were consistent with the idea that animal forms were impermanent, and that animals could acquire human language (Ebihara 2012, p. 137; Roberts 2010, p. 11). Indeed, the literal translation of *bake-neko*, 化け猫, is “changed cat.”

This paper argues that rich folklore and myths prepare the Japanese to understand analogic communication in animals and place them on the same spiritual plane as humans. This puts the Japanese at the forefront of anthrozoology in their understanding of the potential relationship between human and animal and the improved wellbeing that can result from this perception (Podberscek, p. 2). What follows is an examination of two animal myths—one featuring a cat and the other a fox—that illustrate the Japanese propensity to think in anthrozoological terms. This leads to a discussion of Buddhism and Shintō to demonstrate the ways in which Japanese religion supports the notion that the line between animals and humans is blurred.

Like all folklore and myth, Japanese cat myths are anchored in real life experience. Although cats sleep much and are notoriously hard to train, in certain circumstances they can be extremely useful. In Medieval Japan animals were primarily justified in utilitarian terms. Companion pets were a rare luxury. They might be found at the court in Kyoto, but farmers and merchants needed a more practical justification for owning an animal. In that context, cats were prized as vermin-catchers, and by the Tokugawa period they were commonly kept in homes for that purpose (Dunn, 1969, p. 151). Cats had other, more exotic uses based on

abilities that humans couldn't match. The cat's ability to predict the weather and natural phenomena like earthquakes hinted at a connection with nature that was regarded with a sense of wonder in Medieval Japan. Even today, scientists are not sure how cats do this, but Japanese fishermen and sailors gratefully take advantage of it, watching the ship's cat for any sign of a coming storm (Helgren 1999, p. 31).

This ability to predict the weather and earthquakes—in effect, to predict the future—was celebrated in popular culture. An example that is still celebrated today is *maneki-neko*, or the welcoming cat. The myth began when a feudal lord, or *daimyō*, was passing by a run down Buddhist temple just outside Tokyo. He noticed the temple cat watching him and seemingly beckoning with his paw. Curious, the *daimyō* walked towards the cat just as a bolt of lightning struck the spot where he had been. Believing that the cat had intentionally saved his life, the *daimyō* endowed the temple with money and land, and when the cat died he had a statue made in its honour. To the Japanese this is a benevolent-cat myth, where a cat displays supernatural powers and communicates with a human. Westerners, perhaps thinking of the slightly tacky beckoning cat statues in shops and restaurants, and the myth's latest incarnation, Hello Kitty, tend to be skeptical, but a visit to the Gotokuji temple, a short ride from Tokyo on the Odakyu Line, gives food for thought. After all, a Buddhist temple, where the remains of generals, prime ministers and corporate chiefs are interred, has a certain credibility, and the monks, who maintain a special *maneki-neko* shrine in the temple grounds, take the myth seriously (Brown 2006, p. 172; *Japan Monthly Web Magazine*, November 2011.)

Finding a benevolent cat myth being endorsed by Buddhist monks should come as no surprise, as animals are regarded very differently by Buddhists than by Christians. The Christian church traditionally made a sharp distinction between humans and animals, and theologians argued that as God created animals for the use of humans, they were entitled to treat them as they wished. Buddhists, by contrast, make every effort to ensure that they do no harm to other living beings. They believe that inflicting suffering on other creatures causes suffering for themselves. This is woven into their ideas about the cycle of birth and rebirth, where attaining nirvana demands not harming any living creatures (Phelps 2004, pp. 2, 42). Because one can be reborn as a dog or a cat, or vice-versa, Buddhism thus reinforces the Japanese notion of a blurred boundary between humans and animals.

Buddhism is not the only spiritual influence on the Japanese. After it was introduced to Japan it coexisted alongside Shintō, the indigenous Japanese belief system (Dunn 1969, p. 4). There is some debate about whether Shintō is a true religion—it has no founder, no single god, and no written code, and is probably better described as a set of beliefs rather than a single, coherent doctrine (Reader 2007, p. 25). Nevertheless, it gives the Japanese people a creation myth, and it tells them that their island nation is sacred and that nature should be treated with respect. This is reinforced by the belief that kami, which loosely translates as spirits, reside within mountains, trees, animals, rocks, and streams. None of this clashes with Buddhism, and over time Shintō and Buddhism have influenced one another until it can be said that a distinctly Japanese Buddhism has evolved (Andreasen 1998, p. ix).

Shintō is also compatible with Buddhism in allowing the Japanese to accept the idea of blurred boundaries between humans and animals. A good example is the deity Inari. Inari seems to have evolved in Japan from the Indian Buddhist goddess Dakini, and eventually there were thousands of Shintō shrines dedicated to her (Smyers 1998, p. 82). The reason for this popularity was that Inari was the deity associated with a successful rice harvest, which was central to Japan's prosperity and even survival. However, as Inari became more Japanese, she was imbued with Shintō and Japanese folklore influences. Her messenger was a fox, or in Japanese, *kitsune*. In order to convey messages to mankind, Kitsune could either enter the body of a human, or transform into a human (Roberts 2010, p. 69). Typically this meant a beautiful young woman, although at times when the kitsune grew careless or drank too much saké she would let her fox tail show from under her kimono. The parallels between kitsune and *bake-neko*, which also had giveaway tails when in human form, are clear, but whether it was a fox or a cat, the Japanese lived with the knowledge that the animal had the potential to take on human form, and every time a farmer and his family visited an Inari shrine, where two fox statues stood erect, to ask for a good rice harvest, he was reminded of that potential—the fact that the statues were each adorned with a red scarf meant that they

were hard to miss (Reader 2007, p. 90). In this way, Japanese history, myths and folklore underpin the Japanese relationship with companion animals.

## **Part 2. Traditional Ideas About Animals Surviving in the 20th Century**

As Japan entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more and more people came to live in an urban industrial setting, and people were increasingly disconnected from nature in their daily lives. Machines replaced farm animals, and people rode on trains rather than horses. In these circumstances, it might be expected that the old ideas about kami, humans and animals living in a shared realm would wither away. However, shintō proved surprisingly durable, and although the village life that allowed folklore to be kept alive as an oral tradition *did* wither away, ideas about blurred boundaries between kami, humans and animals were kept alive through new forms of popular culture. This section argues that the endurance of Japanese history, folklore, myth and the Shintō and Buddhist religions into the 20<sup>th</sup> century has sparked a culture of anthropomorphising animals, specifically in literature and film. Imbuing animals with human characteristics and acknowledging their ability to communicate demonstrates an advanced understanding of animals and the need to protect them.

The Association of Shintō Shrines claims that there are 80,000 shrines in the country today, a figure that suggests that belief in the existence of kami is far from dead, and the *Japan Times* has noted the impact Shintō has on politics and its effectiveness in “renewing [traditional] Japanese spiritual values” (McNeill 2013). Indeed, an example of how tenaciously modern Japan clings to traditional values is found in the world’s fourth biggest cosmetics company, Shiseido. The Shiseido brand connotes modern elegance, but the company, established in 1872, honours Japan’s past and its Shintō soul. The very name Shiseido, which come from a classic text that reads “praise the virtues of the earth which nurtures new life and brings forth significant values,” has obvious connections with Shintō’s reverence for nature.<sup>1</sup> A visit to the company’s Ginza headquarters bears this out, for on the top floor is a shrine dedicated to the god Inari, guarded by the traditional two foxes (Reader & Tanabe 1998, p. 203).

The folklore that existed alongside and complemented Shintō’s blurring of humans and animals had a harder time surviving the modernisation and urbanisation that Japan experienced in the Meiji era, but tales of animals who could speak did survive, albeit in written rather than oral form. A good example is Natsume Sōseki’s *I Am a Cat*, or *Wagahai wa neko de aru*. Originally published in serialised form in 1905-1906, *I Am a Cat* was released as a complete novel in 1911. The book critically examines life in Meiji Japan via a narrator who is a cat. The innocent sounding detachment this allowed proved an effective tool, as a passage commenting on the Western/Christian idea that humans had the right to own and exploit animals demonstrates:

In the first place it is my opinion that the sky was made to shelter all creation, and the earth was made so that all things created that were able to stand might have something to stand on... Next we ask to what extent did human effort contribute to the creation of heaven and earth, and the answer is that it contributed nothing. What right then, do human beings hold to decide that things not of their creation belong to them? (Natsume 2002, p. 169).

While *I Am A Cat* is not highbrow, literary fiction, it does not have the same vividness as a folk tale transmitted at a family gathering or in a tavern. A closer print equivalent of these tales developed after WWII in the form of comic books known as manga, which in turn spawned anime. The power of manga and anime to convey vividly powerful messages is derived from a complex intertwining of content and form that developed over a long period of time. Manga is thought to have its origins in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when Buddhist monks produced scrolls that had a pictorial narrative. Significantly, these narratives often featured animals with human characteristics and abilities. The most “famous example of this was the Chōju Giga, or ‘animal scrolls,’ which featured monkeys, foxes and rabbits acting out the activities and

pastimes of monks and the nobility” (Brenner 2007, p. 2).

Anime had the same potential for complex storylines, which is hardly surprising given that it was developed by manga artists, who took advantage of the new medium of television to show their work to a wider audience (Odell and LeBlanc 2014, pp. 18-21). This potential was initially limited by the duration of television shows, but in the 1980s some television animators established their own studios, where they made feature length films (Odell and LeBlanc 2014, pp. 23). This gave anime producers the freedom to have their stories follow traditional Japanese patterns, where the story wanders and is not composed of neatly linear storylines. Miyazaki Hayao, Japan’s most successful animated film maker, employs stories that wander and flow in ways that a *Japan Times* reviewer suggested do “absolutely nothing to advance the plot” (Schilling 1989). Miyazaki believes that using these traditional literary styles connects with Japanese audiences, and he uses them to showcase traditional Japanese story themes in which animals talk and share the stage with humans.

In Ghibli films the blurred, impermanent line separating humans and animals is apparent, and as Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc show in their book on Miyazaki’s work, “metamorphosis is a vital element in many Ghibli films” (2014, p. 25). A good example of Miyazaki blurring the line between human and animal is the 1989 film *Majo no takkyūbin (Kiki’s Delivery Service, 1989)*. Kiki, the teenage witch protagonist in the film, has a talking cat named Jiji. As the film progresses, Kiki and Jiji both mature and make new discoveries. This has profound effects on their relationship, particularly when Jiji falls in love with another cat, causing her to lose the ability to speak. In other Studio Ghibli films the blurring of boundaries is enacted in dramatic ways, with animals taking on human form and humans taking on animal form. In *Gake no ue no Ponyo (Ponyo, 2008)* a fish-girl is washed ashore and falls in love with a human boy named Sōsuke. To be with Sōsuke, and against her father’s wishes, she grows arms and legs and becomes human. In *Neko no ongaeshi (The Cat Returns, 1999)* the metamorphosis is turned around, with a young girl named Haru finding herself in the Kingdom of the Cats, where she starts turning into a cat. In both cases, the metamorphosis is reversible. Ponyo reverts to her fish form before finally becoming human after Sōsuke kisses her, and Haru escapes the Kingdom of the Cats to become human once more.

The degree to which Ghibli films give an accurate portrait of Japanese attitudes is borne out by the way major corporations have also used blurred boundaries between humans and animals in their advertisements. Two illustrative examples are the telecommunications giant Softbank and the fabled electrics company Matsushita (now known as Panasonic.) In 2006 Matsushita advertised an air purifier by trying to position it as a family product. They took out a two page newspaper advertisement with a caption that read “Kodakusan no kuni ni natta Nippon” (Japan, a country blessed with children.) The accompanying photo featured a woman with her two children, one perched on each shoulder, looking into the camera. On one side was a chubby little baby. On the other was a shiba inu dog (Skabelund 2011, pp. 189, 190). It should be noted here that Matsushita is not a risk-taking corporation. Rather, it has a reputation for not spending money on research and development, letting other companies be the innovators, then shamelessly copying their products, with minor changes to avoid infringing patent law. The shiba inu ad was in the same vein. Matsushita had seen how the public accepted anthropomorphised animals in manga and anime, and followed suit. The following year Softbank blurred the boundaries even further. Many families treat their pet like a child, and the growth of pet ownership in Japan has often been explained in part as a reaction to the falling birth rate (Skabelund 2011, p. 191). Softbank ads featured the fictional Shirato family, consisting of a husband, a schoolteacher, his wife, their son, and a daughter who works in a Softbank office and has access to the latest Softbank products. Nothing too weird there, except it turned out that the father was a white shiba inu dog named Otōsan (literally “Dad”) and the son was an African American played by Dante Carver. In the West this might work with a children’s audience, at least for a while, but in Japan it was taken more seriously. Polling has revealed that Softbank’s Otōsan ads were the most popular with Japanese *adults* five years running, from 2007-2011, and helped transform Softbank from a small, insignificant company to the number two player in the Japanese mobile phone and internet market (Corkill April 29, 2012, n.p.).

Corporations like Matsushita and Softbank use advertising to sell their products, not to influence people’s

attitudes, but because in seeking the largest possible target audience they eschew controversial or eccentric subject matter, the fact that their advertisements blur the boundaries between humans and animals is important. Anime makers can afford to be more idealistic, and many scholars have noted the prescriptive nature of Studio Ghibli, with the environmental messages in films like *Ponyo* quite apparent. The impact of these messages is difficult to measure, but the real question is not whether Ghibli films shape the Japanese psyche, but rather what they tell us about a people for whom traditional ideas about the fuzzy line separating humans and animals is very much alive.

The ongoing vitality of history, religion and folklore is illustrated by the way that new myths that reinforce traditional beliefs can still take root and grow. The stationmaster at Kishi Station, in Wakayama Prefecture (its nearest major city is Osaka) is a good example, because the stationmaster is a cat named Tama. Of course, Tama's appointment was a gimmick. Paid in cat food, her official duties consist simply of greeting passengers—she doesn't check tickets or answer questions about the train timetable—but her appointment saved the financially struggling Kishigawa line and injected an estimated 1.1 billion yen annually into the local economy. The Wakayama Electric Company, which runs the Kishigawa line, has also pointed out that the original *maneki-neko* became a tourist attraction just like Tama, and saved a financially strapped Buddhist temple (Wakayama Electric Line website). More significantly, the Japanese who flock to Kishi attribute Tama with very human qualities, admiring her loyalty and diligence (*Japan Daily Press* February 26, 2014).

While the understanding and development of close relationships with animals should lead to greater animal welfare, the next section will demonstrate that the Japanese often extend this to treating their companion animals as human babies, enforcing their will on and subjugating the animal to them.

### **Part 3. Problems With Companion Animals**

While thousands of Japanese make a pilgrimage to Kishi to see a stationmaster cat, millions make their own commitment to animals by purchasing a companion animal. There are now 23 million pet dogs and cats in Japan, a figure that exceeds the number of children under the age of 15. Indeed, the declining birthrate is touted as one reason for the Japanese embracing animal ownership. As Todd Leonard explains, “childless couples and singles are substituting the love and care they would normally give a child to their pets” (Leonard 2009, p. 160). Akiba Jirō, a cameraman, and his partner, a freelance editor, typify the trend. “In Japanese society,” Jirō explains, “it's really hard for a woman to have a baby and keep a job.” His partner decided to keep working, and instead of a baby, they have a dog they named Kotarō. It means “first-born son” (*The Guardian* June 8, 2012). This is supported by McCarney who states, ‘companion animals’ are more popular with “Japan's younger generation” than children (p. 30).

There are other related reasons for the surge in ownership of companion animals. Using animals as surrogate children means that the traditional preference for keeping animals outside has been eroded. The only problem is that in the past Japanese homes were too small and fragile to accommodate an animal. This problem has been solved by affluence. The boom economy in the 1980s allowed larger dwellings, and it is clear that the greater the floor space, the more likely that the resident(s) will own a pet (Sepell 1986, p. 40). At the same time, the shift from traditional tatami mats to more resilient floor coverings such as polished boards or hardwearing carpet meant that the Japanese could keep an animal inside and not have to worry about damage to the floor. Casting companion animals in the role of surrogate children has had an effect on the type of animal chosen. Even though Japanese apartments have become more ‘companion animal friendly’, cats, being smaller and more fastidious than dogs, would seem a better choice for urban animal owners. However, going against Western trends, Japan has slightly more pet dogs than cats (*Japan Times* February 28, 2010). The reason is that small dogs are better child substitutes—they are more affectionate, and unlike cats, who dislike leaving their home, can be shown in public. The sight of a young woman wheeling a small dog through a shopping mall in a “baby” stroller, or cradling the dog in her arms on a train, has become more and more common (Skabelund 2011, p. 189). The desire for a child substitute has also affected the breed of dog chosen. The Akita, Japan's traditional canine symbol, was revered as a

ferocious guard dog and for its unswerving loyalty. While these traits are still universally admired, a hulking dog who growls menacingly is not what a young woman seeking approving smiles in the local Aeon shopping mall needs. And so, young women tend to buy small dogs such as Chihuahuas, toy poodles and Pomeranians. A trait shared by all the small dog breeds popular in Japan is that they are cute. This can partly be explained by the desire for an appealing baby substitute, but it also reflects a much wider phenomenon known as *kawaii*.

Emerging in the 1980s, *kawaii* was first associated with young schoolgirls, but has now emerged as a dominant “cute” aesthetic (Okazaki & Johnson 2013 pp. 6-32). The problem is that *kawaii* is associated with puppies, the younger the better. The most popular puppies with buyers are just fifty to sixty days old, meaning that they are separated from their mothers and sold before they are sufficiently developed physically or emotionally. Kittens also suffer from being separated from their mothers too soon, and arrive at their new homes frightened and un-socialised (Skabelund 2011, p.188). This can lead to a disappointed owner, and, as the puppy or kitten grows and matures, can lead to the not-so *kawaii* adult animal being abandoned. The *kawaii* pet also needs to survive fashion trends. As Elizabeth Oliver explained, “pets go in and out of fashion just like clothes; one season huskies are in, the next it’s miniature dachshunds... This means that each year hundreds of thousands of pets are abandoned by their owners” (2014). While many people who buy a *kawaii* puppy fall in love with it, treating the puppy as a fashion accessory is a form of animal cruelty. Puppies don’t enjoy wearing designer clothes and it is doubtful whether any puppy enjoys being pushed around a shopping mall in a stroller. Unfortunately, many young animal owners don’t see it that way: “My dog really hates to go out with his feet,” said one owner. “He doesn’t like walking at all.” To keep the dog looking good, even if it is dangerously unfit, owners can pay for grooming, massages using aromatherapy oils, and a relaxing soak in a pet-specific onsen (hot spring) (Evans & Buerk 2012). This is an example of the way in which blurring the lines between humans and companion animals has resulted in the mistreatment of animals as the human fails to interact with the animal on its own terms.

Companion animals that are used as child substitutes run the same risk of having their natural play instincts curbed. While they can rely on a warm bed, plenty food, and the best veterinary care if they fall sick, this can lead to a grim situation where, according to Wada Midori, a Tokyo veterinarian, “If the animal has an incurable disease [the owners] tend to be very devoted and they will do whatever they can to prolong the pet’s life rather than euthanise, so they can be together for one more day” (Scott 2013, n.p.). Indeed, doting owners often find it hard to deal emotionally when their beloved companion animal’s quality of life is inhibited by extreme old age or illness. For owners who find that their animal is too old and weak for them to look after at home, the Aeon Pet Company now offers a pet nursing home. The aging animals there receive the best veterinary care possible, but they can no longer run or play, and they pine for their owners (Ryall, 2014, n.p.).

This is not the first time that human status has caused animals problems. The Akita, Japan’s canine symbol, symbolised by Hachikō, who waited every night at Shibuya Station for his deceased master to return, was revered for his loyalty and courage. In the 1930s right wing nationalists promoted the idea that this embodied the ideals of bushidō (Skabelund 2009, p.171). However, in the desperate last years of the Second World War, the Japanese decided that this meant that Akitas should be expected to sacrifice themselves for the emperor and nation, just like soldiers and airmen (Skabelund 2011 p. 130). The Akitas’ loyalty was repaid by being killed to conserve food or for their fur, and by the war’s end their numbers had shrunk significantly (Rice 1999, p.10). Being wheeled in a pram and dressed in baby clothes is hardly as formidable as being killed in a war or even put into an animal old-age facility, but in a bizarre twist, the intense love bestowed on family companion animals seems to make it difficult for the Japanese to sympathise with and care for animals that are *not* part of their immediate family. Collectively, through their government agencies, the Japanese people show a strange lack of compassion for strays and abandoned animals. Strays in Tokyo are collected by officers from the city’s Metropolitan Animal Protection and Consultation Centre and deposited in city-run shelters. In 2010 over 250,000 animals wound up in such shelters, but only 52,000 found homes. The figures don’t deviate much year by year, and although 50,000 people adopting an animal is wonderful, it means that 200,000 animals are euthanised. According to Elizabeth Oliver, the showpiece of the public animal shelter system, a gleaming, new 2,700

million yen centre in Tokushima, was designed to disguise the fact that its main purpose is to euthanise animals. “Outside it’s like Disneyland,” said Oliver. “Inside it’s like Auschwitz. They have spent millions coming up with a system so they can press a button to gas the dogs, and no one knows where it is taking place” (Oliver 2008, p. 107; Oliver 2014, n.p.).

Even if the harsh euthanasia policy in state run shelters was common knowledge, it is unlikely that more than a few additional shelter animals would find a home, and the type of animals currently adopted gives a clue why: Just as the Japanese who buy from pet shops prefer young kittens and puppies, people who adopt gravitate to young animals. In part this is just because kittens and puppies are so cute and so vulnerable. In part it is a practical decision. Older dogs and cats unfortunate enough to end up in a shelter tend to have problems that need medical attention. At the very least they will be under-nourished and in need of a wash and brush. Many are in need of dental work, and some bare scars from fights with other animals or mistreatment from humans. In the worst cases, a cat will be missing an eye or a dog will have lost the use of a leg. As well as needing more care than a kitten or puppy, these sick or battle-scarred veterans are harder to get to know. They are scared, and a new owner needs to win their trust. For all these reasons, adopting an older dog or cat is just too hard for many people. Elizabeth Oliver, who runs her own animal shelter (Kansai ARK) understands that people willing to adopt shy away from the challenge of an older, damaged animal. Indeed, she sometimes prefers to keep traumatised, sensitive animals out of the adoption process. The example closest to her heart was a dog named Momo Too. The little dog had been found in a garbage bin. She had been badly abused, having both front legs broken. She never quite recovered full mobility, which made her almost impossible to adopt, in spite of having what Oliver described as “a sweet personality.” She became a mascot for the ARK shelter, making school visits with Oliver, charming young children and spreading the animal welfare message (Oliver, 2008. P.46). Oliver believes that adoption decisions are also influenced by the desire to have a new family member who can be shown off to friends, neighbours, and even strangers in the shopping mall. The adopters hardly want their new “child” to be old, injured, or even cross-bred—pure-bred dogs and cats are much more adoptable. According to Oliver the desire to acquire a family member means that animals with well-developed personalities are overlooked in favour of young puppies or kittens who can be shaped according to the new owner’s vision.

## **Conclusion**

“Walking the streets of Tokyo, you could be forgiven for thinking Japanese companion animals are the luckiest in the world,” observed a *Japan Times* writer. “In many cases,” he added, “they probably are” (Scott, 2013, n.p.). Of course, those millions of pampered companion animals make the 200,000 who end up in shelters every year seem even sadder in comparison, and this has animal rights advocates demanding tougher laws (Oliver, 2008, p.109). However, while legislation would limit the cases of cruelty or abandonment, it would not solve the more common problem of animals having their natural instincts curbed to enable them to live in a human environment, or as often happens in Japan, to live as a human. In this way the Japanese experience lends weight to the extreme “abolitionist” position that humans should not impose themselves on or control other species. However, it denies the fact that animals, particularly dogs and cats, with thousands of years of domestication bred into them, reciprocate the love given to them by humans (Francione & Gerner, 2010; Rowlands, 2009). The dog dressed in a Gucci coat and being carried around a shopping centre might look ridiculous, but, like so many cats and dogs, it probably loves its owner. Dogs and cats even have it in them to forgive humanity for being mistreated, and this is just as well, because in Japan, for better or worse, they live in a human world. While Japan has the capacity to be a leader in animal welfare stemming from the anthropomorphisation of animals in Japanese folklore, literature, and modern popular culture, the paradox is that these companion animals are often infantilised and forced to subjugate themselves to their human owners.

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## Notes

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