

Unique Cat Culture in Japan

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Abstract: This paper explores the profound connection between Japanese culture and cats, a relationship recognized by both locals and foreigners. It delves into the historical roots of cat culture in Japan, tracing its origins back to the Nara period when cats were introduced from China. Cats, revered as sacred and noble beings, have influenced various aspects of Japanese society, including the establishment of cat shrines and the famed Cat Island, Tashirojima. Through a detailed examination of these cultural elements, the paper highlights how cats reflect Japanese social norms and human relationships. Field surveys on Tashirojima reveal the harmonious coexistence between residents and cats, showcasing the island as a microcosm of Japanese society. The aging phenomenon of both cats and residents on the island further mirrors broader societal issues in Japan. By studying the unique cat culture in Japan, this paper aims to provide deeper insights into Japanese traditions, social behavior, and the intricate relationship between humans and animals.

Keywords: Cat Culture, Japanese Culture, Japanese History.

1. Introduction

"Japanese people are similar to cats." Have you ever heard such a statement? Not only the author but also many of my foreign acquaintances recognize a profound connection between Japanese people and cats. Cats are perceived as sacred and noble, with a strong sense of personal space, which mirrors the impressions that Japanese people give in terms of human relationships and social conduct. The origin of cat culture in Japan is ancient, with a long and rich history. During the Nara period, cats were introduced to Japan from China via the Kentoshi (Japanese envoys to Tang China). These noble and divine creatures have since sparked a unique cat culture in Japan.

Cat culture in Japan has influenced various aspects of society. There are numerous cat shrines, and there is even a world-famous Cat Island, Tashirojima, where cats outnumber human residents. By examining the seemingly small element of "cats," we can gain a deeper understanding of Japanese culture, supplement our knowledge about Japan, and see the broader picture of its society. Through the study of cat culture, we can delve deeper into Japanese traditions, social norms, and the unique relationship between humans and animals in Japan.

2. History of Cat Culture in Japan

2.1. Origins

Throughout world history, domestic cats are believed to have originated in ancient Egypt. Being nocturnal and possessing eyes that adapt uniquely to changes in light, cats were revered by the ancient Egyptians. They believed that cats could conquer the unsettling darkness and thus save humanity. The moon goddess was depicted with a cat's head and a human body, and the sun god was represented as a male cat. These sacred and noble images endowed cats with dual identities as the "gods of the moon and sun," earning them profound respect and worship from the ancient Egyptians. This sacred and noble image influenced later views on cats, providing a foundation for maintaining their dignified status as they spread to other countries.

2.2. Emergence of Cat Shrines

Shrines are places where Shinto rituals are performed, and cat shrines are dedicated to the worship of cats. The black cat brought back by Ganjin was housed in the Shosoin repository at Todaiji Temple. The stories of the monk and the cat spread, imbuing the cat with mythical qualities of luck and protection, leading to the establishment of cat shrines where people revered cats as sacred beings.

In China, it is generally believed that cats were introduced during the Western Han dynasty from the Arabian region. Confucius stated in Li Ji [1], "In ancient times, gentlemen would always repay kindness; they welcomed cats because they ate field mice," marking the earliest recorded presence of domestic cats in China. During this time, trade routes between the Western Regions and the Central Plains were established, and cats were brought to China along with goods such as chili peppers, grapes, and cucumbers. As cats continued to breed, they became common and well-recognized animals in China.

During the Tang dynasty, which corresponds to Japan's Nara period, exchanges between China and Japan were particularly active. Japan frequently sent envoys to China, bringing back various arts, technologies, agricultural products, and animals, including cats. The Buddhist monk Ganjin returned to Japan with scriptures and a black cat to protect them from rats. This black cat, believed to bring good fortune and endowed with spiritual power, marked the official introduction of cats to Japan [2]. Revered in the Buddhist culture for protecting scriptures, the black cat was thought to bring luck and spiritual protection, much like in ancient Egypt. During the Nara period, cats were seen as noble and sacred, admired by the aristocracy, and kept indoors on leashes to prevent escape.

As a result of these influences, cats became highly valued and cherished animals among the nobility and aristocracy. They were kept as prized possessions, often leashed indoors to prevent them from running away [3]. Commoners were prohibited from owning cats, as documented in Heian period literary works like "The Tale of Genji" and "The Pillow Book," where cats were exclusively associated with the aristocracy. It wasn't until the Edo period, with Tokugawa Ieyasu's issuance of the "cat leash law," that cats began to enter common households.

2.2.1. Gotokuji Temple: The Origin of Maneki-Neko

Shrines are places where Shinto rituals are performed, and cat shrines are dedicated specifically to the worship of cats. The Tang cat brought back by the Buddhist monk Ganjin to protect the scriptures from rats was housed in the Shosoin repository at Todaiji Temple. Stories about the monk and the cat spread widely, and the cat of Shosoin began to acquire a mythical aura, believed to possess the powers of bringing good fortune, inviting luck, protecting against misfortune, and turning bad luck into good.

As a result, cats started to be enshrined and worshipped at these shrines. Many people began to view cats as sacred beings and objects of reverence. Over time, this led to the establishment of the

culture of cat talismans (neko omamori) at various large temples. These cat talismans became symbols of good luck and protection, and the reverence for cats continued to grow, reinforcing their sacred status in Japanese culture.

2.2.2. Imado Shrine: Inviting Love

Imado Shrine, originally known as Imado Hachiman Shrine, dates back to 1063 during the reign of Emperor Go-Reizei. In that year, Minamoto no Yoshiie and his son, Minamoto no Yoshimitsu, received an imperial command to subdue the rebels in the Tohoku region. During their campaign, they brought a branch from Iwashimizu Hachiman Shrine in Kyoto to Imado, establishing the Imado Hachiman Shrine.

Empress Jingu, the mother of Emperor Ojin, was revered for her military campaigns in Korea and was believed to have carried Emperor Ojin in her womb during her conquests. Due to these legends, Emperor Ojin was also known as the "Womb Emperor" and "Holy Mother Emperor," and was worshipped as a deity of safe childbirth and child-rearing.

The deities Izanagi and Izanami, a divine couple associated with creation and marriage, were enshrined at the Haku-san Hime Shrine in Kaga. In 1441, Chiba Suketada brought their worship to his castle, emphasizing their role in ensuring the prosperity of descendants and blessing marriages. In 1937, Imado Hachiman Shrine was merged with Hachiman Shrine, and the unified shrine was renamed Imado Shrine.

Imado Shrine is famous for its "maneki-neko" (beckoning cat), which is believed to invite love. The shrine provides love fortunes (omikuji) and attracts many visitors who pray for harmonious relationships, mutual love, and protection from misfortune. The beckoning cat at Imado Shrine is particularly popular among those seeking blessings for love and romance.

2.3. Edo Period Boom

Modern society is said to be experiencing an unprecedented cat boom, but a similar flourishing cat boom also occurred during the Edo period. One of the reasons for this, as mentioned in the conclusion of Section 2.1 "Origins," was the issuance of the "Cat Free Roaming Order." Since then, cats became familiar to the common people. Additionally, cats had the useful trait of catching mice, playing a role in pest control, which greatly protected fields and granaries. As a result, the number of people raising cats increased.

Furthermore, during the Edo period, artistic culture reached unprecedented prosperity. Interest in the techniques and aesthetics of Japan's traditional aristocracy and samurai class continued, combined with domestic and foreign influences, urban artistic life was formed. The increase in wealth and investment in the arts by the merchant class became the driving force behind the flourishing of various art forms. One of the most representative art forms during this peak period was ukiyo-e. The scenes depicted in ukiyo-e express the diverse lifestyles of the people in Edo at the time, portraying the daily lives of the masses like an encyclopedia, earning it the title of "a microcosm of Edo life" [4].

Cats, as the most representative pets of the Edo period, were kept indoors with collars adorned with bells. They appear in ukiyo-e curled up and dozing or playing affectionately with their owners. Additionally, they are often humorously depicted with human-like bodies.



Figure 1: Cats Cooling Off.

Note. From An introduction to Ukiyo-e, in English and Japanese [5]. Artist: Utagawa Kuniyoshi. Publisher: S. Watanabe Color Print Co.

As shown in Figure 1, a sailor is lending his hand to a geisha, who is about to board a small pleasure boat from the pier. A familiar scene along the Sumida River in summer invites a smile with cats replacing the human beings.

In ukiyo-e and the works of humorous writers, cats were depicted in charming appearances and mysterious behaviors, which contributed to their widespread popularity. Cats were also considered auspicious symbols, and as a result, cat figurines, sculptures, and paintings became widely popular.

3. Cat Island: A Microcosm of Japanese Society

3.1. Background Introduction

Tashirojima is located in Miyagi Prefecture in the Tohoku region of Japan, about 15 kilometers from the city of Ishinomaki. This small island, with an area of approximately 1.5 square kilometers and a population of fewer than 100 people, is known for its unique cat culture. Geographically, Tashirojima functions as a natural fishing port, and the island's residents primarily earn their livelihood through fishing and aquaculture. Historically, cats were initially introduced to Tashirojima by fishermen to control the mouse population that threatened their fish. Over time, these cats multiplied and became common residents of the island. Today, the number of cats far exceeds the number of human residents, making them a prominent feature of the island.

Tashirojima is often referred to as "Cat Island." This name not only reflects the large population of cats on the island but also the island's friendly attitude towards cats and its deeply rooted cat culture. The island has several cat shelters where residents and tourists can provide food and care for the cats. Additionally, many cat-themed artworks and decorations can be found on the island, including sculptures of cats and road signs with cat paw prints, which have become symbolic of the island's landscape.

As Tashirojima's popularity has grown, more and more tourists have come to witness this paradise of cats and enjoy close interactions with these adorable creatures. The unique charm of Cat Island attracts not only cat lovers but also those interested in studying the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

3.2. Field Survey

During a field survey on Tashirojima, the author observed the variety, number, distribution, and living conditions of the island's cats in detail. It was found that the cats are mainly distributed near the fishing port, residential areas, and tourist spots. These cats come in various types, including orange cats, calico cats, and black cats, each with their own personalities and habits.

Near the fishing port, cats often gather where fishermen unload their catches, waiting to be given fish scraps. These cats usually appear healthy and active, creating a unique scene at the port. In residential areas, cats coexist harmoniously with human residents, who often leave food and water at their doorsteps or windowsills. The cats can be seen leisurely strolling or napping within the residential area.

Furthermore, some cats have become "stars" at tourist spots, where they appear and are accustomed to being petted and fed by tourists. These cats are usually very friendly, becoming a major attraction for visitors. "Shima no Eki," although a restaurant, is one of the key tourist spots on Tashirojima, drawing large numbers of tourists to the island.

The survey also focused on the interactions between cats and human residents. The island's residents show affection and patience towards the cats, providing them with food and shelter and often engaging in close interactions with them. The cats seem to sense the goodwill of the humans, frequently approaching residents for attention and affection. These interactions strengthen the community bond and integrate cats as an essential part of community life.

Lastly, observations were made regarding the health status of the cats. Overall, the island's cats appear very healthy, thanks to the residents' careful attention and regular medical check-ups. However, there are also older cats and injured cats that require special care. The residents and volunteers organize rescue activities to provide necessary medical and rehabilitation services for these cats.

Through this field survey, the author gained a deep understanding of the emotional bond between the cats and the human residents of Tashirojima, as well as the beautiful sight of their harmonious coexistence. It provided an opportunity not only to observe the living conditions of the cats but also to reflect on the concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

3.3. Changes in Local Residents' Lifestyles

As the number of cats on Tashirojima increased, the residents' lifestyles underwent a series of changes to adapt to living with these small creatures. These changes are reflected not only in the details of daily life but also in the residents' deep feelings toward the cats and their emphasis on ecological balance.

First, residents adjusted their household environments. Many homes established dedicated feeding areas for the cats and built small shelters outdoors to protect them from bad weather. Additionally, some households installed cat doors or set up barriers to prevent cats from accidentally entering dangerous areas like kitchens or storage rooms.

Next, residents took measures in their daily lives to reduce the impact of cats on the environment. For instance, some residents planted cat-repellent plants or placed obstacles around their gardens to prevent cats from damaging the plants. Furthermore, residents regularly cleaned up cat waste to maintain public hygiene and environmental cleanliness.

Moreover, the leisure activities of residents were also influenced by the presence of cats. Many people enjoy observing or photographing the cats' daily lives during their free time, finding joy and inspiration in their presence. Interaction with the cats has also become part of community activities, strengthening neighborhood relationships and community cohesion as residents jointly care for the cats.

From these observations, it can be concluded that the residents of Tashirojima have undergone positive changes in their lifestyles through the process of coexisting with cats. These changes not only indicate the residents' attention to animal welfare but also reflect the community's pursuit of ecological balance and harmonious coexistence. Through adaptation and change, the residents have created a loving and harmonious living environment with the cats.

3.4. Perspectives on Cat Island and Tourists

Tashirojima, known as Cat Island, attracts tourists from all over the world. The influx of tourists has a significant impact on the island's life and environment, and the residents have mixed feelings about this.

On one hand, many residents welcome the arrival of tourists. They believe that tourism brings economic benefits to the island, increases its visibility, and promotes the dissemination of local culture. The affection and interest that tourists show towards the cats make the residents feel proud. Some residents have opened small shops or cafes selling cat-related souvenirs and beverages, thereby increasing their income.

On the other hand, some residents are cautious about the influx of tourists. They worry that an excessive number of tourists might disrupt the island's ecological balance and the natural living environment of the cats. For instance, some tourists might overfeed the cats, leading to health problems. Additionally, a lack of attention to safety during interactions with the cats might result in accidental injuries. Furthermore, the noise and litter brought by tourists could disturb the island's quiet life.

To address these issues, the island's residents and administrators have implemented several measures. For example, they have established codes of conduct for tourists, urging them to respect the lives of the cats and residents. They have also set up garbage collection stations to encourage tourists to keep the environment clean. Additionally, through awareness campaigns, they aim to increase tourists' consciousness about cat protection and ecological preservation.

Overall, the residents of Tashirojima have complex and diverse views on Cat Island and its tourists. They welcome tourists and hope to promote the development of the local economy and culture through tourism, but they also have concerns about the negative impacts tourists might bring. Through continuous efforts and adjustments, the residents aim to find a balance and create an ideal place where humans and cats can coexist harmoniously.

3.5. Exploring the Aging Phenomenon

The aging phenomenon on Tashirojima is not only an intriguing natural occurrence but also a social phenomenon worth deep exploration. This phenomenon corresponds with the broader issues of aging and declining birthrates in Japan, reflecting extensive social and cultural problems.

Firstly, the aging of cats on the island demonstrates that the residents place a high value on animal welfare. The residents provide the cats with adequate food, safe habitats, and necessary medical care, all of which contribute to the cats' longevity. Moreover, the island offers a relatively safe living environment for the cats, with few threats from predators or vehicles. However, the aging of the cat population also presents several challenges. As cats age, they are more likely to face health issues such as arthritis and kidney disease. This means that residents need to invest more time and resources into caring for these elderly cats. Additionally, the increasing number of elderly cats could intensify competition for resources on the island, potentially affecting the social structure and stability of the cat population.

Secondly, the aging phenomenon among the local residents reflects societal attitudes and values toward elderly life. With 84% of the population aged over 70 and an average age of 71, Tashirojima

is a society experiencing severe aging. The serious expressions of elderly fishermen still engaged in their work can be observed even today. The residents respect and care for each other, which aligns with Japanese society's attitude of honoring the elderly.

The aging phenomenon on Tashirojima is a multifaceted and multidimensional social issue. It not only demonstrates the love and respect humans have for animals but also reflects societal attitudes and challenges related to elderly life. By deeply exploring this phenomenon, we can better understand the complex issues faced in the pursuit of harmonious coexistence among humans, animals, and nature. Consideration and respect for elderly life are essential elements of Japanese culture.

In summary, it is not an exaggeration to say that Tashirojima is a microcosm of Japanese society.

4. Conclusion

Japanese cat culture is unparalleled in the world. This paper first investigated the origins and history of Japanese cat culture through literature review and then conducted field surveys focusing on cat shrines and Cat Island to deepen the understanding of the relationship between Japanese people and cats.

First, regarding cat shrines, after understanding the background of their establishment, the paper focused on two representative shrines: Gotokuji, associated with the origin of the maneki-neko (beckoning cat), and Imado Shrine, known for maneki-neko that bring good fortune. The paper explored how these shrines were created and developed. Cat shrines are important cultural assets of the region and are cherished by many people as valuable heritage. Further research into the history and role of cat shrines is expected to contribute to the understanding of the local community.

Next, cats have long been deeply involved in people's lives. By reading related literature, it was found that during the Edo period, cats were loved by both nobility and commoners, becoming close companions and frequently appearing in art forms such as ukiyo-e. From this information, it can be concluded that cats were a significant presence in Edo period life.

Finally, this paper conducted a series of field surveys on Tashirojima, known as Cat Island. Tashirojima reflects the diversity of Japanese society and culture, and the increase in cats shows a common concern for animal welfare and harmony with nature. At the same time, local residents have adapted to coexist with the cats and are appropriately addressing the impact of tourism. Additionally, the aging phenomenon on Cat Island symbolizes the understanding of coexistence between humans and animals and respect for elderly life. While this survey provided an understanding of the current state of Tashirojima, future research should focus on the sustainability of tourism and the cohesion of the local community for the island's sustainable development.

As observed, studying Japan's unique cat culture contributes to a deeper understanding and respect for Japanese culture and local communities. The author hopes to better convey the uniqueness of Japanese society and culture to the world through further understanding of Japan's cat culture.

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