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How Pet Dogs and Cats Are Acquired in Japan and the Problems Associated with Keeping Them as Pets



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ABSTRACT

In Japan, keeping cats as pets has recently become popular, and pets are often obtained from pet shops. The most common reasons behind people purchasing cats are that they appear desirable on TV commercials and social networks because people think they are cute to watch at stores, etc.; in short, the motivation to keep a cat is often due to temporary emotions. As a result, there have been many cases of people not being able to keep animals, leading to euthanizations by administrations that pick these animals up or to animals being dumped. Furthermore, breeders and distributors often breed animals in unsuitable environments to increase profits in response to this boom in cat-keeping. This paper describes how pet dogs and cats are obtained in Japan, mentions the problems associated with keeping said pets, and expresses how to solve them based on examples from overseas.



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INTRODUCTION

Japan has long been in a low birthrate and aging state. At present, the number of children is very low, but the number of pets being bred has increased to compensate for this. In recent years, the number of pets, including dogs and cats, has exceeded the number of children. In some cases, they are treated as siblings of a real child, while in others they are acquired instead of independent children. In addition, for a person living alone, a pet may substitute a family or lover. In this way, seeing pets alongside humans on a daily basis has become commonplace in Japan. However, it seems that there are problems in the methods of breeding, purchasing, and raising pets in Japan.

Pet booms occur regularly in Japan. When a chihuahua appeared on a TV commercial, consumers increasingly wanted to keep it regardless of the content of the commercial. Currently, cat purchase requests are increasing due to the effects of posting photos and videos Via Social Networking Sites (SNS)⁽¹⁾. However, before reaching their owners the animals are a product of poor breeding environments⁽²⁾, and after being purchased they are often subjected to improper breeding and illegal dumping due to people being unable to keep them properly. It is a reality that controversial issues such as the culling of stray or lost animals are hidden from the public⁽³⁾. This paper focuses on the subject of obtaining dogs and cats as pets and introduces associated problems.

How pets are obtained in Japan

In Japan, the percentage of pets purchased at pet shops is high (Figure No. 1). There are various reasons for keeping pets, but they are most often associated with “healing” (Table No. 1). Pets also often stimulate paternity and maternity and people want to protect them like a family. As a marketing method in stores, cats and dogs less than one year old are mainly purchased from breeders and displayed at stores as younger animals look more ‘cute’ to consumers. Showing the actual behaviors of the animals by displaying them a glass case is another way to encourage purchases. The clerk often encourages the customer to hold the pet and emphasizes that care (feeding, exercise such as walking, *etc.*) is easy⁽⁴⁾. Visitors not only trust what the clerk says but also decide to purchase pets that can cost hundreds of thousands Japanese yen, based on the pets’ cuteness and behavior in that moment. There are no specific restrictions on opening pet shops in Japan, and there are no particular requirements for becoming a pet owner. At the time of sale, young animals are easier to sell, and those that are

already adults are often more difficult to sell ⁽⁴⁾.

How pets are acquired Overseas

Overseas, pets are obtained differently from in Japan. Britain is said to be the most advanced animal welfare country in Europe, and there are many more countries with developed animal welfare laws in Europe⁽⁵⁾. Pet shops that can be easily opened in Japan are not licensed in the UK⁽⁶⁾, and there are strict laws concerning pet health care and abuse. In-store display sales are prohibited in principle⁽⁵⁾, ⁽⁶⁾. This is to protect the mental development of young pets that are not weaned and to prevent stress and sleep disorders caused by being displayed for a long time in stores under bright lights. In Germany, no pets are killed, unlike in Japan ⁽⁵⁾. This is probably because pets are often obtained via adoptions from shelters ⁽⁶⁾, whereas there is a preference for young animals in Japan because they are 'cute'. In addition, taxes such as "dog tax" have been set up, and measures to prevent pets from being kept or given up easily are in place ⁽⁵⁾. As a result, it is unlikely that demand for pets will surge as a result of commercials and SNS, as in Japan, meaning that there is less demand for pets to be sold. Germany therefore seems to represent an ideal environment in which demand and supply are balanced.

Problems associated with buying pets

In Japan, a certain buying boom occurs for a type of pet temporarily, and at that time many sales are completed (unfortunately, the idea of adoption is not widespread). The seller will try to sell more pets during the boom, so he will buy more animals from the breeder. Breeders also try to breed a large number of animals temporarily for profit, resulting in unsuitable environments that can often result in the spread of disease and unpleasant odors due multi-breeding in small areas. There are situations where animals may not only suffer from physical illness but also mental issues such as antisocial behaviors due to lack of social interaction ⁽⁷⁾. The problem continues after the boom has passed. Pets that are displayed and raised in stores are less likely to attract buyers. Those that become ill during breeding are often left untreated. They are often killed in public facilities or illegally dumped to become stray animals. The number of animals that can be sold, changes greatly between boom and non-boom periods ⁽¹⁾. As pet shops and breeders try to temporarily increase supplies due to the boom, many animals will inevitably go unsold. However, they are not kept by shopkeepers or breeders. As discussed later, animals are treated as objects in Japan. Animals that are kept like families may be considered equivalent to humans, but others are treated similarly to household goods.

There is a pervasive attitude that animals can be easily released and replaced. In addition, there are many cases where pets purchased easily can no longer be kept due to their behavior or care requirements ⁽⁴⁾. In some cases, the owner may not be able to take the pet for a walk, or the owner may frequently leave home for business trips and may not be able to continue to take care of the pet.

Pet-related Laws

As mentioned earlier, young animals tend to sell better in pet shops. Also, longer display times make the 'product' more visible to customers and may result in more sales. Conversely, although the idea that animals are not humans but objects has not changed, there has been increase support for the idea that since they are living things, abuse or injury is undesirable. As a result, the Act on Welfare and Management of Animals is now in force ⁽⁸⁾. The process began in 1973 with the enactment of the "Act on the Protection and Management of Animals", which encouraged the collection and containment of injured animals, mainly dogs and cats. Since then, more and more people have lived with animals as pets, and the purpose and methods of breeding have gradually changed. This led to the enactment of the "Act on the Protection and Management of Animals" (the "Animal Protection Act") in 1999. It has since been revised in 2005, 2013, and 2019. The law aims to: 1) improve animal dealers (distributors), 2) improve conditions in centers breeding multiple animals, 3) pick up stray dogs and cats, 4) deal with pets after natural disasters, and more (e.g., obligation to make an efforts for lifelong care) ⁽⁸⁾.

However, this law is not properly enforced at present.

Regarding 1), it obliges that companies selling animals such as dogs and cats must formulate a "Health and Safety Plan for Dogs and Cats". This is to protect newborn animals and to improve previously- unsuitable breeding environments. In addition, it was previously unclear how animals should be dealt with when sales declined. The systems and maintenance measures necessary to protect the health of puppies and kittens, and their parent animals, how to deal with unsold animals, and how to breed, store, and display animals were all specified in detail. In particular, dogs and cats within 56 days of birth can no longer be sold (Enforced by 2022) ⁽⁷⁾. Although it is not yet enforced, there is concern about unscrupulous businesses that may sell young pets by falsely indicating their age. Also, unlike the UK, the system for displaying and selling the animals themselves has not changed.

Regarding item 2), if the living environment is unsuitable for multi-animal breeding, the prefectural governor can give recommendations and orders to the owner to improve the situation. The contents of recommendations and orders (noise, odors, animal hair disposal, insect pests, etc.) have been clarified, and situations that may cause abuse have been added to this content. However, they are not well-understood and there is often a lack of response to complaints from local residents.

Regarding item 3), it was clearly stated that each prefecture could refuse to pick up pets if the owner of the dog or cat asked for them to be picked up. Normally, prefectures collect pets, but in cases where personal selfishness is the cause, they no longer need to pick up pets. This means that if a pet has not been picked up after a certain period of time, it will be euthanized in a gas chamber called a "dream box" ⁽⁹⁾. Refusal by owners to accept this has statistically reduced the number of pet deaths (Figure No. 2), but unfortunately, the numbers do not take into account the unknown numbers of individual killings or dumping.

Regarding item 4), the prefectural governments had to formulate the "Animal Protection Management Promotion Plan", and it was obliged to state how pets will be dealt with in the event of a disaster. Cooperation during disasters has also been added to the responsibilities of animal welfare promoters. Owners are required to prepare for pets in case of disaster and for their pets to accompany them upon evacuation. However, there is also a problem of noises and smells associated with pets at evacuation centers, and the difficulty of evacuating with a pet to the same place has not yet been properly address.

Regarding 5), breeders and those who work in pet shops and zoos have final responsibility for taking care of all animals, including pets, carefully and properly under appropriate environmental conditions. In the 2019 revision, dogs and cats were required to be equipped with microchips that recorded owner information ⁽⁷⁾. However, implanting the chip requires treatment by a veterinarian, and if there is no opportunity to go to an animal hospital, it cannot be determined whether the chip is in place.

Current issues with pet breeding in Japan

One possible solution to the problem of unwanted pet cats is the adoption of "local cats" by communities. This involves residents taking care of stray cats (possibly dumped by their owners or resulting from natural breeding) in towns and other areas. In addition to feeding,

vaccinations and castrations are also carried out using town membership fees. The number of stray cats cannot be reduced to zero, but these measures may prevent the number of cats from growing. However, we believe there is a problem with this approach. Residents may become less conscientious in caring for their animals if there is this 'back-up' system in place, and with whom the responsibility lies is often ambiguous when problems such as fouling or traffic accidents occur.

Secondly, there can be issues with pets owned by senior generations ⁽¹⁰⁾. If the elderly live alone or as a couple, they fear that they will not be able to take care of pets later in life, even if they buy them instead of having children (Table No. 2). Pets are good for 'healing', but a few pet owners have a plan in place for when they are unable to take care of their animal (Table No. 1). This can be stressful.

Thirdly, at the time of acquisition, fur color and type of animal may be important to the buyer. This is based on the animal's appearance when posting photos on SNS. Thus, kept animals can be thought of as a fashion. Animals with black fur tend to be shunned because they do not photograph as well as animals with other fur colors. One of the reasons why cats are so popular today is that they are easy to keep. Basically, cats that are kept indoors stay in the house all day, so it is easy to take pictures and videos; it is thought that it is easy to gain popularity on Instagram and other SNS due to the popularity of cats on the internet. Changes in the Japanese family structure are also fueling the cat boom. This may be related to the nuclear family, declining birthrate, and increased co-working. Dogs are animals that must be taken for walks, but cats generally do not need the same level of care as dogs. It is generally assumed that if a cat is well-fed and watered, it is safe for the owner to leave the house for longer periods of time, e.g. when going for a night out. However, cats are able to cope less with new environments than dogs¹⁾, and in extreme cases, cats may die due to diarrhea or vomiting in unfamiliar environments. In many cases, they die of infectious diseases as a result of reduced immunity.

Fourth, breeders seem to be over breeding and exploiting breeding cats ⁽¹⁾. The longer the hours of daylight, the more likely a cat is to breed. We have heard that breeders are encouraged to shine a lot of fluorescent light on cats to promote breeding. Dogs usually breed twice a year, whereas cats are seasonal breeders and females enter estrus when exposed to sunlight for more than 12 hours. They give birth around 70 days after mating, and estrus occurs again in 2-8 weeks. Because of this, the breeder can produce kittens up to four times a

year. As a result, breeding female cats this way puts a considerable burden on the body. Lack of calcium causes teeth to become distorted and bones to become brittle. Repeating this process until the age of eight, when breeding is over, leads to females becoming exhausted and in poor condition. Although little of this is known to the general public, many pet animals can become ill and die before meeting their owner. The number is said to be about 25,000 dogs and cats per year ⁽¹⁾.

CONCLUSION

It would be ideal if the laws related to pet breeding and keeping were repeatedly revised and the lives and rights of animals were better protected. However, the most pressing problem is that these laws are not properly enforced. For example, one of the requirements of the Animal Protection Act is that businesses must not make or sell animals with genetic disorders. However, many cats are inbred to produce purebred offspring that often have genetic diseases. The municipality is supposed to be able to provide guidance, recommendations, and orders, but these are rarely given ⁽¹⁾. This is because the Ministry of the Environment and local governments are not working actively. We believe that these bodies do not intend to impair profits through voluntary regulation because the pet industry is so large. In addition, there is a problem individual pet owner, as many only care for their own pet and have no interest in the wider issues ¹⁾.

Many breeders and pet shops know that pet dogs and cats are bred and kept in poor conditions. In particular, cats do not have a well-established vaccination program, so even if they are vaccinated with commonly recommended vaccines, infections may not be sufficiently controlled ⁽²⁾.

Now that the cat boom has arrived, what will happen after the boom has passed? Animals that have been bred so far will no longer be sold and surpluses will occur. As a result, the surplus animals will be illegally dumped and euthanized. This has happened many times with similar booms, to the detriment of animal lives. In order to stop the process repeating again, it is necessary to set strict standards for owners so that animals cannot be obtained so easily, and it is crucial to tighten marketing permits so that pets are not oversupplied. As in other countries, live animal displays in stores may need to be reconsidered. Animals are not humans, but they too have lives with value. We should be careful not to throw those lives away so easily.

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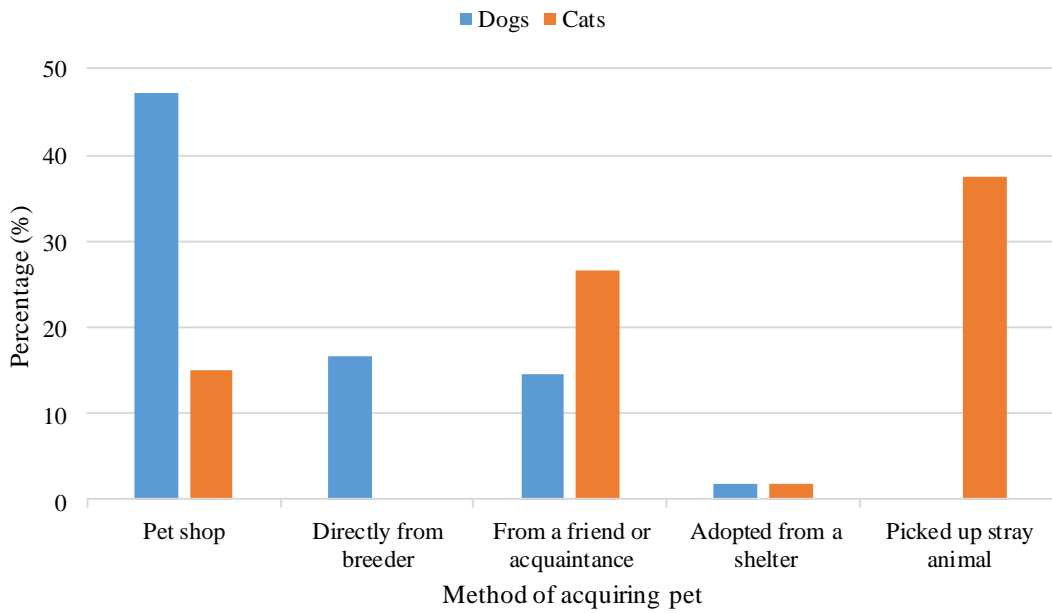


Figure No. 1: Dogs and Cats are obtained in Japan

Based on data from Reference (4).

2017 survey results by the Pet Food Association of Japan.

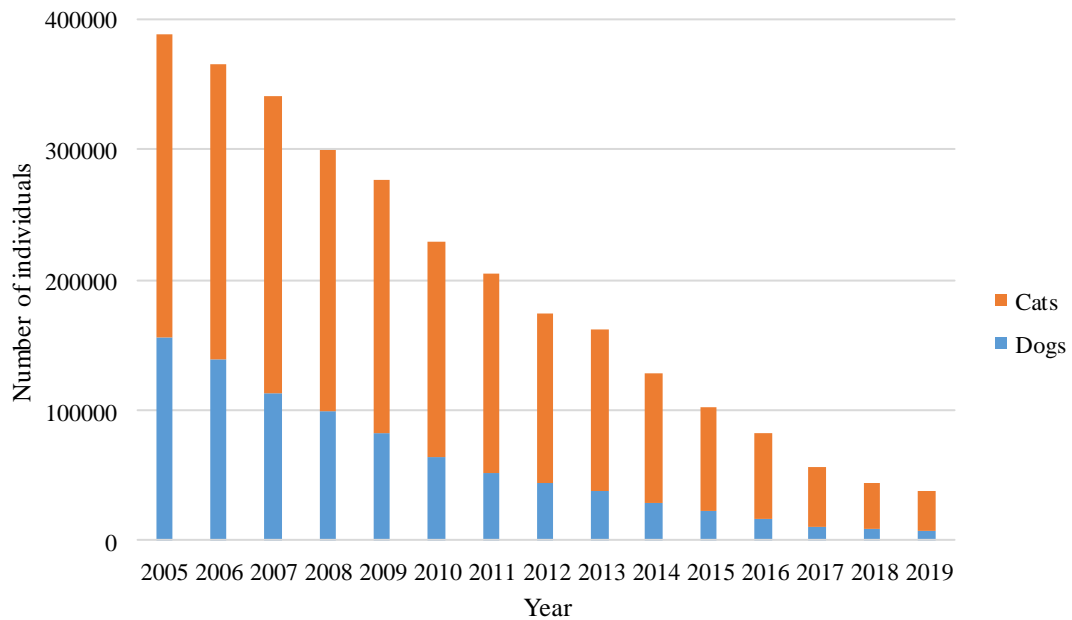


Figure No. 2: Number of dogs and cats euthanized per year

Based on the data in Reference (9).

Number of animals taken and euthanized by administrative facilities such as prefectures.

Table No. 1: Survey of older pet owners on their reasons for having a pet

Question	Answers
Do you like having a pet?	Yes 89.0% No 10.1%
What made you want to get a pet?	88.1% Healing 57.8% More family conversations 29.4% Loneliness 29.4% Exercise 17.4% To make friends 16.5% For children (emotional education, etc.) 7.3% For parents (such aiding recovery) 2.8% Other
Do you have a plan for when you can no longer care for your pet?	20.0% Yes 20.0% Thinking about it, but not yet 60.0% Not yet thinking about it

Based on data from Reference (10).

A questionnaire survey was conducted in October 2019 on 112 people over 60 with pet dogs or cats.

Table No. 2: Examples of obstacles and worries about keeping pets

Pet characteristics	-How long can I live with my pet due to the pet's illness or lifespan? -I have a Western cat, but they are more susceptible to disease and have a shorter lifespan than Japanese cats.
Owner concerns	-I am worried about dying early. -About when I started taking care of myself. -How long can I take care of my pet for as I grow older? -Would I put a burden on my only daughter if I die and she has to take care of the pet? -Can I care for my pet economically when I get older? -If I can't take care of my pet due to illness, is there a place that can take care of my pet instead?
Ambiguous	-If I can't travel because I am concerned about my pet's condition. -Cat aging and decline in physical strength due to owner aging.

Based on the data in Reference (10).

A questionnaire survey was conducted in October 2019 on 112 people over 60 with pet dogs or cats.

