

Understanding East Asian Culture Through the History of Cats

Yuqi Cai, Majestic International College'25

Abstract

This essay explores the multifaceted and intriguing relationship between cats and humans in various cultures. Despite their current popularity in the online realm due to their adorable traits, it is crucial to acknowledge that the perceptions and associations of cats have evolved significantly throughout history and differ across societies. The essay highlights the diverse attitudes towards cats in South Korea, Mongolia, China, and Japan as examples. It also discusses the origins and symbolisms of Maneki Neko, the fortune cat, to better understand the bigger cultural ideals that it entails. Cats have been regarded as symbols of both luck and misfortune, transitioning from working animals to cherished companions in many societies. It is important to understand the cultural context when examining the relationship between humans and cats, and cats serve as a lens through which we gain insights into East Asian cultures and histories.

Keywords: East Asian Studies, Japan, China, Korea, Cats, Symbolism

Introduction

Cats, with their charming appearance and enigmatic nature, have earned the title of the "popular kings" of online video platforms. The amusing antics of cats and their heartwarming interactions with their owners in videos have an undeniable charm. However, the bond between humans and cats dates back thousands of years, and unfortunately, not all attitudes towards cats have been positive. In summary, while cats have gained immense popularity on online platforms for their endearing qualities, it is important to acknowledge that cats have both positive and negative associations throughout history.

Cats in South Korea

In South Korea, there is a prevailing belief that cats bring misfortune. Due to negative stereotypes, cats are often subjected to despicable acts of animal cruelty, more so than dogs. However, it is essential to note that cats were once regarded as symbols of luck in South Korea, particularly among Korean Confucian scholars. They believed that the presence of a cat would bring them good fortune and help them succeed in the rigorous "Gwageo exam," a national civil service examination that required years of dedicated study. Passing this exam was considered a lifetime achievement, and when a scholar returned to their hometown after passing, it was a cause for great celebration and honor. Historical records recount the tale of Shin Seok, a classical scholar who spent an entire day in search of a cat. Finally, on the night before the exam, he encountered a cat and went on to pass the exam. This story highlights the belief that encountering a cat during the exam preparation stage was considered an auspicious sign and a

stroke of luck (Bizwire, 2017). However, over time, certain ancient Korean folktales portrayed cats as treacherous adversaries, leading to a fear of cats as bringers of evil and misfortune to their owners. These folktales have contributed to the negative perception of cats in some circles (L., 2018).

Cats in Mongolia

Similar to South Korea, Mongolia's perception of cats is also nuanced. In ancient Mongolian records, cats are seldom mentioned, as the nomadic lifestyle of the Mongolians did not necessitate their presence. However, despite this initial lack of prominence, cats hold a significant level of respect among Mongolians (Terbish, 2023). In my view, this respect appears to be somewhat obligatory. Mongolians generally believe that by showing respect and kindness towards cats, they can diminish any negative or dark energy associated with them. Conversely, if cats are treated with disregard, their dark energy is believed to increase. With the introduction of Buddhism, this reverence for cats grew even more pronounced. Many monks and shamans started adopting stray cats and actively encouraged laypeople to treat cats with respect and provide them with food. Thus, while cats may have had limited historical documentation in ancient Mongolian annals due to the nomadic lifestyle, their importance and the need to accord them reverence became more prominent with the influence of Buddhism (Terbish, 2023).

Cats in China

China's attitude towards cats has undergone a series of contradictions and transformations over time, shifting from adoration to fear, and eventually embracing them as beloved companions in modern times. The earliest historical references to cats can be found in the pre-Qin period, specifically in the "Yi Zhoushu," where cats were depicted as mascots and skilled mouse catchers, without any association with supernatural or ghostly attributes.

However, during the Sui and Tang dynasties, approximately 800 years later, cats began to face a gradual "alienation" due to the influence of the Xianbei witch culture, which regarded cats as dangerous creatures. This perception persisted for about 150 years until the middle and late Tang Dynasty when Empress Dowager Wu Zetian developed a fondness for cats, leading to their reintegration into people's lives.

With the economic prosperity of the Song Dynasty, people's living standards improved, and cats transitioned from being primarily mouse-catching tools to cherished pets. The concept of cat culture, specifically the "begging cat," emerged during this time. Before adopting a cat, individuals would prepare certain offerings such as salt or fish, and sometimes even choose an auspicious day. Interestingly, there would also be a "cat deed" associated with the adoption process (Zhihu, 2021).

However, the publication of "Liaozhai Zhi Yhi" during the Qing Dynasty once again demonized the image of cats. According to the stories, cats were portrayed as causing women to become "confused," "rambling," and ultimately ending up in a "depressed" state. Throughout history, cats have been associated with Yin, representing the feminine, which is why they have

often been linked to women. To understand Yin, it is important to grasp the concept of Yin and Yang, a prehistoric Chinese philosophy that recognizes the universe as a combination of opposing yet complementary forces. Yin and Yang represent relativity and balance, and their existence is believed to be crucial for a healthy and harmonious life (Romil, 2021).

Cats, being active at night and displaying a calm demeanor, align more with Yin, while dogs, known for their daytime activity and curiosity, are associated with Yang. This distinction in energetic qualities has led to the belief that cats are more suitable for boys (Yang) and dogs for girls (Yin), reflecting a broader balance in the world. In ancient Chinese folklore, cats were often depicted as driving women to madness, as an excessive presence of Yin energy was believed to disrupt the balance. However, this alienation during ancient times did not diminish the status of cats as popular pets. Cats continued to be cherished by dignitaries, empresses, concubines, and ordinary people alike, remaining a prevalent choice for domestic companionship in daily life (Romil, 2021).

Cats in Japan

Similar to other countries, Japan also exhibits a mixed attitude towards cats. In Japan, cats are deeply ingrained in the culture. Cat Day is celebrated every year on February 22nd. The presence of cats in Japanese history can be traced back to the Heian era when they were known as "Tang cats." During this period, Japan looked to China, particularly the Tang Dynasty, for inspiration and knowledge. Concerned about mice damaging historical books, cats were introduced to Japan. Initially, cats were exclusive companions for royal aristocrats, who would

dress them up and play with them. Emperor Yudo even praised his cat for its prowess in catching mice at night. Another emperor went so far as to invite his minister, mother, wife, and concubines to celebrate the birth of kittens from a mother cat.

However, during the Kamakura era, attitudes towards cats took a different turn. Influenced by Chinese folklore surrounding cat demons, it was believed that a cat's tail could split into two strands, disturbing people's minds. To counter this belief, the Japanese began to favor short-tailed cats, as their tails did not split. The iconic "wealth cat" or "beckoning cat" that we are familiar with today is a representation of the short-tailed cat. In the Edo period, the government issued an order to release cats due to a rat infestation. This marked a significant shift, as cats started entering the households of ordinary people and became valued companions for pest control. Throughout Japanese history, cats have held a special place, evolving from exclusive pets of the aristocracy to beloved members of ordinary households. Their presence continues to be cherished in Japanese culture.

Indeed, cat culture has had a profound influence on Japan, permeating various aspects of daily life and language. There are several Japanese words that are influenced by cat culture, showcasing the unique characteristics and behaviors associated with cats. One example is "nekojita" (猫舌ねこじた), which translates to "cat tongue." It refers to the fear of eating hot food or a person's preference for avoiding hot food, similar to how cats are known to be cautious around hot objects. Another term is "nekoashi" (猫足ねこあし), meaning "cat feet." It describes people who walk quietly and softly, without making much noise, just like the light and stealthy footsteps of cats. Cat women, or "nekomimi" (猫耳), are fictional characters who possess cat-

like features, often depicted with cat ears and sometimes even a cat tail. This concept has become popular in various forms of media and role-playing (知知日本, 2020).

Maneki Neko

One of the most well-known representations of traditional Japanese cats is the "Maneki Neko" (招き猫), also known as the "fortune cat" or "beckoning cat." Even if you haven't visited East Asia, you may have encountered the adorable figures at some Asian restaurants. Contrary to common misconception, the cat is not waving but beckoning someone over with its raised paw. In Japan, the gesture to beckon someone is done with the palm forward and the fingers pointing down, unlike in Western cultures. Gōtoku-ji, a temple in Japan, is known for its tranquil grounds adorned with thousands of beckoning cat statues, often shaped like Japanese bobtail cats. Visitors come to see the array of white cats and pray for luck. These statues can be purchased at the temple and are typically left behind as offerings, although many people also take them home as souvenirs. The Manekineko Museum of Art in Okayama houses a collection of over 700 lucky cat statues from different time periods. Furthermore, the Manekineko Festival is celebrated annually in September in various cities across Japan. In Tokoname City, Aichi Prefecture, there is even a street called Manekineko-dori (Beckoning Cat Street), adorned with numerous ceramic cat statues. In Tokyo, Gōtoku-ji is a popular destination for cat lovers, while the Imado Shrine also sells its own version of the maneki-neko.

The origins of Maneki Neko are speculative, but two popular stories are often shared. One story dates back to the 17th century, involving a wealthy aristocrat who sought refuge under

a tree near a temple during a storm. He noticed a cat nearby, seemingly waving at him with its paw. Following the cat's gesture, he left the tree's shelter just before it was struck by lightning. To show his gratitude, he became a patron of the temple, ensuring its prosperity. Another story revolves around an old woman in the mid-19th century who could no longer afford to feed her pet cat and had to release it. In a dream, the cat appeared to her and instructed her to create a doll in its image, promising good luck in return. The woman followed the cat's guidance, made a statue out of clay, and sold it at a shrine's gate. The popularity of these terracotta cat figures grew rapidly, ultimately lifting the old woman out of poverty (Kimura, 2023). Both stories share a common thread of cats saving people, often with a touch of magic or spirituality. Cats are portrayed as guides or beings with higher cognition, adding a mystical element to their abilities. Taking cats as symbols of luck reflects the East Asian cultural pursuit and yearning for fate and good fortune. Overall, the influence of cat culture in Japan extends beyond mere symbolism, permeating into everyday language, beliefs, and folklore.

The maneki-neko statues, with their raised paw, pointy red ears, and accompanying accessories such as coins, have been believed to bring luck and prosperity for centuries. The image is often used as an amulet at the entrances of restaurants and shops to attract business and promote prosperity. The meaning of the beckoning cat can also change depending on which paw is raised: the right paw is believed to attract money and good fortune, while the left paw is said to invite friendship and customers. Additional accessories, such as a bib or bell, reflect the historical care and regard for pet cats in Japanese society. Overall, the maneki-neko holds a

special place in Japanese culture and is celebrated through various festivals, museums, and even dedicated streets. It continues to be seen as a symbol of luck and prosperity (Kimura, 2023)

Conclusion

In conclusion, cats have left an indelible mark on human culture worldwide and the status of cats in East Asian culture varies with the region. Cats are a symbol of happiness and beauty but could also be representatives of evil. They have been both loved and feared, worshipped, and misunderstood. Despite the variations in beliefs and attitudes towards cats, their charm and mystique continue to captivate us, and their place in our hearts remains unshakable. Cat culture extends that when people face the sufferings of life, they will place their beliefs on a certain creature or an object to get spiritual comfort.

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