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Animal Cafés in Japan: The Dark Underbelly of *Kawaii* Culture

There are few things in life that are as simple and pleasurable than popping into a café and enjoying a lovely cup of coffee. At cafes in Japan, coffee isn't the only thing on the menu—whether you have a craving for cats or a hankering for hedgehogs, there is probably an animal café somewhere in Japan that is more than willing to satisfy the urge to interact with a cuddly critter for a nominal fee. I recently had the opportunity to travel to Japan to study the cultural phenomenon of the animal café for myself, and the results were a shock to my American sensibilities. In this recounting of my research, I argue that animal cafes are the result of cramped and restrictive living spaces in Tokyo meant for social relaxation but have evolved into an ethically questionable fetishization of animals that requires more strict regulation and enforcement.

But first, a little background history. Where did the idea of opening an animal café even begin? It all started with cats, and the very first cat café (called Cat Flower Garden) opened in Taipei, Taiwan in 1998 (Poletick 2014). The trend then made its way to Osaka in 2004 and the industry boomed, quickly racking up several dozen cafés in Tokyo alone by 2008 (Robinson 2017). With the café market saturated in cats, café owners expanded their offerings to other domesticated animals like hedgehogs and rabbits to remain competitive in 2010 (Robinson 2017). Even more recently, animals that would be considered exotic, such as otters, fennec foxes, owls, penguins, and meerkats have been the latest trend in animal cafés luring both the stressed out, overworked

Japanese youth and tourists who would not have opportunities to interact with wild animals in their home countries.

I was one of those tourists. Living in Washington State, the opportunities to interact with traditionally non-domesticated animals are very limited because of the Animal Welfare Act of 1966, which lays out the regulations for the treatment and handling of animals by dealers, research facilities, and exhibitors (Animal Welfare Act 1966). I was very excited to go to an owl café in Akihabara, *Akiba Fukurou*. Before entering the café we (my research partner, Dan, accompanied me to all the café visits) were required to read a document describing the owls in the café and the proper procedures to handle them. After paying our fee, washing our hands, and entering the establishment, we were again given a rundown and demonstration of the rules by the staff. The facility itself exceeded my expectations: it was small, but very, very clean, especially considering that there were probably almost 20 birds in residence. Each owl had a good amount of space, but they were chained to perches along the walls to prevent them from flying about the space. The atmosphere was very quiet—classical music was playing, and we were instructed to speak in hushed tones as not stress out the birds. Further, many owls were labeled as being “on a break,” which meant that patrons were not allowed to touch them or request to hold them. The owls seemed pretty relaxed, and I was dazzled by their cuteness, gently stroking the top of their heads as I was instructed.

I was so enamored with the idea of the animal café after the owl experience that I simply had to see more! A few days later I came across a café advertising rabbits and small clawed otters. In my excitement at the prospect of being able to touch an otter I rushed into the facility requesting a space. I knew immediately upon entering the area where the animals were kept that this was not a very reputable establishment... The shop had separated the rabbits and otters (thank god), and

the first area we were in was with the rabbits. We were given slippers and aprons to wear in the enclosures (and not very nice ones at that). The rabbit enclosures were extremely dirty, and cages of rabbits were stacked along the walls to the ceiling. The two rabbits that were out for our session seemed stressed and only wanted to come near us if we gave them food, to which they literally jumped at the chance. We moved on to the otter area, which was in the basement of the building, and the only way I can describe that experience is utterly horrible. Before I even entered the room, I could smell it in the outdoor stairwell as I stood next to some haphazardly stacked cages in varying degrees of disrepair. As we entered the room my heart sunk to the bottom of my stomach. It was a tiny, unfinished basement with no windows that was split into two separate enclosures. We were ushered into the one with several people already in it that contained three otters. We were told to sit on a very low urine covered couch (I was glad for my manky loaner apron) and given some treats to lure the otters to us. Immediately after we sat down, one of the otters rooted beneath Dan's apron and went straight into the pocket of his cargo shorts, presumably searching for food. The otters were aggressively food motivated, rushing to get treats and fighting with one another to get some of them, which led me to believe the keepers purposefully keep them food motivated in order to get them to interact with customers. Our attendant even pulled one of the otters up by the tail, which was distressing. We left shortly after, and I had some major thinking to do.

How could a place like this exist in a city like Tokyo, where *kawaii* culture is so famous and lauded? What factors are there in Japanese culture that have given rise to an industry so novel that no one knows how to regulate it? And what are the regulations in place where it would be considered legal to keep animals in such deplorable conditions? These questions were going to take some deeper investigation.

My first step was to visit an actual pet store to see what was available for the Japanese public to purchase. The animals were limited to cats and very small breed dogs, but the prices were astounding! The most expensive dog I came across was a Shiba Inu selling for ¥800,000 (almost \$8,000USD)! Even the cats were up in the ¥300,000-¥500,000 range! I thought about my two cats at home, whom we had paid \$100 each to adopt. There was no way I would have been able to get one cat at \$3,000, let alone two. I had a conversation with one of my instructors, Miki Mizuno, about the high prices of the pets in Japan. Miki confirmed my suspicions that pets are considered a luxury item in Tokyo. It's no secret that apartments tend to be very small in Tokyo, and one has to have a lifestyle that would afford them to keep the pets. Most apartments are very restrictive on pet policies, and even if one is not then the owner must be able to pay the fees associated with owning the pet.

The result of these factors has led younger Japanese people in the 20's and 30's to not owning pets, though they still crave companionship and the relaxing benefits of pet ownership (Poletick 2014). And here is where the pet cafes have become so popular—the rent-a-pet business model is extremely appealing to young people whose lifestyle cannot support them owning a pet but who still crave the benefits of interacting with them. This generation of young people are living in the aftermath of Japan's economic crash of the 1990s and are now living and working in an unstable economy with unpredictable employment (Robinson 2017). Animal cafés offer these people places where they can be social and destress, taking a break from their hectic lives with the help of some ultra-cute furry/feathered/scaly friends. If I had only just visited the owl café, I may have thought that this was all there was to the matter, but after my darker experience with the otters I had suspicions that there were more factors at play.

One of the largest questions I had was how could these establishments legally operate? After quite a lot of digging, I found that animal cafes must apply for a license with the Ministry of Environment, though regulations, standards, and inspection are left to local governments (Yubaru 2016). Animal cafés are considered “Animal Exhibitors” and are allowed to have provisional human contact included in their certificates (*Japan's Regulations and Environmental Law 2016*). Reading through the Regulation for Enforcement of the Act on Welfare and Management of Animals revision of 2016, animal exhibitors must keep their places of business clean and spaces must be appropriate for the animals exhibited, including play and rest areas. Animal business owners must also display their certification in a prominent area where customers can easily see it (*Japan's Regulations and Environmental Law 2016*). Indeed, ownership of what Americans would consider “exotic” animals is legal in Japan so long as you can prove that the animal came from a breeder and was not captured in the wild (Hesse 2000). So, it would seem on the surface that the mere ownership of the otters in the café I visited was legal, though the facility they were kept in could be questioned by the prefectural government they obtained their certification from upon inspection as it was not clean, nor appropriate (otters should not live in a tiny basement).

There is a wide debate in Japan about the proper handling and care of animals in general. Many people in Japan have adopted animals into their families in place of having children and have even requested that their pets be given Buddhist burial rites as members of the family. There are more than 900 pet cemeteries in Japan, about 120 of which are operated by Buddhist temples offering memorial rites and services for pets (Schattschneider 2014). So, clearly, there are people in Japan who care deeply for their animals. On the other hand, there are many who view animals as a means for entertainment. Reports from volunteers at Ueno Zoo, one of the largest zoos in Japan in the heart of Tokyo, say that most people tend to visit the zoo as merely a source of

entertainment and care little for engaging in active learning about the animals in the zoo (Robinson 2017). Having visited this zoo myself, I would have to concur with that assessment.

Animal cafés have not escaped the debates either. Animal rights activists have come forth saying that the treatment of animals within these establishments is cruel and stressful, citing that animals are not allowed to properly rest or follow their natural instincts (Yubaru 2016). Owls in owl cafes, like the one I visited, are chained to a perch and are unable to hunt or fly. They are also nocturnal creatures but are forced to work during the day. The otters in the café I visited had no place to run, play, or swim.

Cat cafes have received much of the focus in the public eye, most likely because they are the most ubiquitous and have been around the longest. Some have argued that cat cafés reinforce the notion that animals are meant to entertain (Jackman 2016). The first closure of a cat café in Japan due to unhygienic conditions was in April of 2016. After reports from concerned patrons, inspectors found the cats living in *Neko no Te café* to be suffering from severe colds, and there were more than 60 cats living in the 30-square-meter space (Forster 2016)! This also sparked public health concerns, since feline illnesses can also be passed to humans or through humans to other cats in other cafés. The incident pushed a revision of the Regulation for Enforcement of the Act on Welfare and Management of Animals, which stated operating times for animal exhibitors of dogs and cats. The law states that these exhibitors only be able to operate from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. A further revision was made after pushback from the industry and its patrons to allow cat cafés to remain open until 10 p.m. The provision reads that “exhibition hours for specified mature cats (which means the number of hours from the earliest time to the latest time from among the exhibition start times and the exhibition closing times for specified mature cats [in the case where

more than one specified mature cat is exhibited, the exhibition start times and exhibition closing times for each specified mature cat] shall not exceed a total of 12 hours per day.”

There are still some who feel that this law is ridiculous and unreasonable. One opinion article for The Japan Times titled *Loosening up on Animal Cafés* argues that “allowing the cat cafes to remain open 24 hours seems entirely reasonable, given that cats are instinctively nocturnal creatures, just like many urban residents,” and, “excessive interference in the cafes means one less healthy, relaxing activity for a hardworking populace.” These arguments are fundamentally flawed. Cats are not nocturnal, but are in fact crepuscular, meaning that they are most active around dawn and dusk (Yubaru 2016). This argument also implies that the need of the human populace for animal labor in the form of relaxation and entertainment takes precedence over the general wellbeing of the animals living and working in these establishments.

It is also worth pointing out that the Regulation for Enforcement of the Act on Welfare and Management of Animals specifically states businesses working with cats and dogs in regard to working hours, leaving businesses who choose to showcase more exotic animals largely unregulated in this concern. There is a 24-hour monkey bar in Tokyo that features squirrel monkeys, but the operating hours of the bar gives the monkeys no time to rest as living creatures require to maintain healthy and happy lives (Yubaru 2016). Other animals such as owls, rabbits, and others are also not afforded the protection of the law.

To wrap it all up, it is clear that though animal cafés seem harmless and fun on the surface that there needs to be more clear and strict regulations regarding what kinds of animals should be exhibited and the means for keeping those specific animals in humane conditions. This trend shows no signs of slowing down, and the animals put on display become more exotic and fantastic with each new iteration, potentially putting the public and the animals themselves at risk. Once an

animal has been commoditized, it then turns into an object in both the eyes of the consumer and the business owner, turning the focus from the welfare of the animals to making a profit. The obsession of all things *kawaii* has blinded much of the populace to the fact that the creatures they are commoditizing are living things, not objects, and they are worthy and deserving of legal protections. There are absolutely many establishments that are wonderful, and they care for the animals they exhibit (HARRY'S Hedgehog Café in Harajuku comes to mind), but there are many others throughout the country who are mistreating their animals and who are making a profit from it. If there are even a few animals living in these deplorable conditions, it is our ethical duty to rectify the situation so other business owners do not follow their example. It is the best thing for both the animals living in these cafés and for the people visiting them.

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