

The Emergence of “Pets as Family” and the Socio-Historical Development of Pet Funerals in Japan

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Abstract:

Discussions on the popularity of pet animals in present day Japan tend to stress the position of pets in a family as resembling that of human family members. In this paper, I investigate this claim by analyzing the meanings that have been attributed to animal burial and pet graves in modern history. This paper presents data on the emergence of animals as modern pets during the early twentieth century and the way their position in the family was expressed, by looking at inscriptions on pet tombstones and at the structure of posthumous care for dogs and cats. These animals used to have a strong spiritual connotation in pre-modern Japanese society, and spiritual vengeance by animal spirits was warded off by performing memorial services for these animals, which resembled rituals for untimely human death (also considered a potential source of spiritual harm). Field data from two pet cemeteries established in the early twentieth century suggest that these rituals gradually changed to the pet funerals that are common today, but still the motivations and interpretations that underlie pet funerals and memorial services in Japan are diverse. Although pet funerals nowadays are very similar to human funeral ritual, spiritual elements in the attitude towards animals have not entirely disappeared. Rapid urbanization after World War II brought along a surge in demand for pet cemeteries, requiring pet cemeteries to adopt new strategies in the form of locker-style ossuaries to efficiently store large amounts of pet remains in a limited space. Commercialization of pet funerals in the urban environment has gone hand in hand with a tendency towards shorter mourning cycles for the owners, suggesting that the significance of animal funerals in Japan has shifted from prayer for the animal soul to a way of expressing grief by the pet owner.

Keywords: [DŌBUTSU KUYŌ](#); [JAPAN](#); [MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR ANIMALS](#); [PET AS FAMILY](#); [PET CEMETERY](#)

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