PETTO KUYŌ: CHANGING VIEWS OF ANIMAL SPIRITS IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN*

Barbara Ambros

Early in the afternoon on Sunday, July 15, 2007, the small main hall of Jikeiin, a Rinzai temple in Fuchū in Western Tokyo with one of the largest and busiest pet cemeteries in the metropolitan area, is crowded with sixty people—mostly middle-aged women and a few young women and elderly men. Despite the heavy rains of a typhoon that morning, they have

Figure 1. Segakie service at Jikeiin, Fuchū, Tokyo on July 15, 2007. (Photograph by the author, 2007)

* This article is based on fieldwork at thirty pet cemeteries in the larger Tokyo metropolitan area, Nagoya, Kanazawa, and Niigata, where I interviewed Buddhist clerics, cemetery employees and cemetery clients and engaged in participant observation. I also surveyed popular publications, cemetery websites, and Internet chat rooms. A longer version of this article has previously appeared as Ambros 2010.
come to attend the yearly *segakie* 施餓鬼会 ritual for pets. The patrons have received booklets so that they can chant along with the clerics as they intone the *Heart Sūtra*, a Kannon *dharani*, and the Bodhisattva’s Four Vows. A censer box is passed through the rows of patrons so that they can offer incense. The service ends with brief a dedication of merit. There is no sermon, and the pets are not mentioned individually, but some patrons will commission individual services later in the afternoon.

As the ritual is about to begin, Mrs. M., a middle-aged, slender woman, slides into one of the last open chairs next to me. She whispers:

> You know, it was my cat who woke me up this morning so that I would attend this ritual on his behalf. I nearly overslept because of the typhoon. He kept licking me with his rough tongue. I would not have made it in time without him waking me up. When I opened my eyes though, he was gone.

Her mackerel tabby Jun had died only eleven days earlier at the age of twenty. She did not immediately want another cat, but her neighbor brought her a kitten that was Jun’s spitting image, except that his tail was a bit longer. The new cat took immediately to her so she became convinced that Jun had been reborn as this kitten. When the kitten had woken her up this morning, it was a message from Jun that he did not want her to miss his memorial service.

In the 1990s, the Japanese pet industry expanded into a trillion-yen business. Estimates place the number of pets above the number of children under the age of fifteen (cf. Weekly Ōsaka Nichinichi 2008). With the pet boom, there has also been a dramatic growth in the pet funeral industry. Indicated by the pervasive usage of the term ‘our little ones’ (*uchi no ko* うちの子) to designate pets, contemporary Japanese pet owners increasingly view their companion animals as family members (*kazoku no ichi’in* 家族の一員); therefore, pets often buried and memorialized with rites due to a family member. There are now over 900 pet cemeteries in Japan, about 120 of which are operated by Buddhist temples (Yamamoto 2006: 64). Even pet cemeteries not operated by Buddhist temples usually have ties to Buddhist clerics who officiate during rituals on major holy days dedicated to the dead such as the equinoxes (*higan* 彼岸) and festival of the dead (*obon* お盆). Buddhist mortuary rites for pets have become an institutionalized practice, even though some temples, particularly those of the Jōdo Shin sect, reject the performance of pet memorial rites. However, in my ethnographic fieldwork at over thirty pet cemeteries over the past four years, it was apparent that Buddhist clerics left their views on the afterlife of pets largely unarticulated even though one would