

WEEKEND

Indifference in Japan's pet kin

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SENDAI — It has often been said — either that, or it's never been said, at least not until now, this being the first time, but then who am I to make such a claim — that a society can be judged on how it relates to its animals. It's fairly obvious, based on the available evidence, that Japan is not about to win any awards in this area.

Walk up to any Japanese dog, and ask him about it. Chances are he'll ignore you. If he isn't chained to something immovable, he'll very likely walk away. He won't even extend the courtesy of growling at you. He can't even be bothered to take a bite out of you, which would at least be a sign that he recognized your existence. (This is why there are so few reported dog bites in Japan each year.)

As far as the dog is concerned, we humans just aren't worth the effort. Bad attitude? Hardly. Consider that the average Japanese dog spends most of his life tied up in a drafty dog hutch, eating cold rice and waiting around for a walk. He has few friends and only minimal contact with his so-called family.

Now, whether being bitten by an angry dog is better than being ignored by an indifferent one is debatable, I suppose. On the other hand, think of it from the point of view of human relationships. Would you rather be living with someone who ignored you all the time, or someone who wanted to spend every waking moment fighting?

Most people would choose the fight, I believe. For one thing, fighting is good exercise, insane, livid, psychotic, brutal. You can break inanimate objects, slam doors, perforate walls with dramatic



punches, etc. And then, of course, you get to apologize, grovel like a worm, beg for forgiveness, repair the damage to the apartment, etc. All in all, we're talking process here.

What any of this has to do with our discussion of animals, I'm not sure, but let's proceed anyway. Walk up to any Japanese, and ask him what his favorite animal is. Chances are he'll ignore you. Don't give up. Press him on it. He'll hem and haw a bit, suck in air through clenched teeth, growl, possibly even roll over, but eventually he will sav either cat or dog.

of them looks like some rumpled old polar bear that's just had a run-in with a gang of Eskimos hopped-up on seal blubber. One look at this cat and we rule out pretty. Primal is more like it. When it opens its mouth to hiss at me, I feel as if I'm looking down some dark prehistoric tunnel.

The other cat may be on the pretty side, but that doesn't mean that it refrains from viciously attacking my feet as I'm putting food into its bowl. Furthermore, this does not mean that I then pick it up and smash it against the wall, or throw it out the window. at

der my spell. Either that, or I'm under theirs, which might explain why I'm compelled to feed them every day.

Unfortunately, the power of hypnotic magnetism is an imperfect one. The next-door neighbor's house, for example, is more or less identical to mine. Occasionally the local cats get a little confused and end up prowling around on the wrong roof. The other day I heard her screaming, so I rushed over and found her upstairs trying to hold off a group of stray toms with a broom.

"My god," she howled, "what are these things?"