

The laws on fouling the streets are equally strict. The suburban housewife out with her little charge is ready with a handfull of toilet paper to clean up both dog and pavement.

Many dogs are so well fed that diabetes is now becoming a problem. A leading vet says this reflects Japanese society: the pets, like their owners, are getting weaker with too much good living.

The dogs in our neighbourhood are quick to spot strangers and no robber would get very far. But they do not react to earth tremors any more. The rumble of passing trains has dulled their senses.

The number of dogs imported has tripled in the past five years to more than 7,000. A pedigree Yorkshire terrier puppy, one of the most popular breeds, costs about £335 but a more exotic bitch may cost 10 times more. Nearly three and a half million pedigree dogs are registered with the Japan Kennel Club, but every year more than half a million strays have to be put down or are used for medical experiments.

An extraordinary woman, Mrs Michiko Fujita, who is a real estate saleslady by day and a geisha by night, saves some of them. At the last count she had 700 dogs and cats in her home outside Tokyo. Seven part-time helpers come in during the day to help look after them. The food for the animals and the helpers' salaries cost more than £10,000 a month.

Luckily Mrs Fujita has the 500 members of the Fujita Bow-Meiow Association to help out with their subscriptions when times get hard, which is most of the time. But most dogs do not have to put with such problems.