

Animal-Lore

The longer one lives in Japan the more sharply aware one becomes of the contrasts that exist in this country. I'm not referring to the oft and well-trampled observations of old and new; traditional temples versus the Shinkansen for example, but in an ultrahigh technology setting you sometimes hear something or see something that jolts you right out of the 21st century back into the Dark Ages. I was admiring a spanking new hydroponics set-up one day; greenhouses stretching as far as the eye could see filled with tomatoes, their roots dangling in water not earth. Ventilation, nutrients in the water, pesticides, fungicides, temperature; all controlled by an elaborate computer system. A set-up costing millions. The wife of this new technology farmer was a townie dressed to match her husband's investment. However as the conversation drifted from tomatoes to the difficulties of living in a rural backwater, I was staggered when she blurted out, "It was grandma who made me cut off the kittens' tails" Kittens' tails? "Quite messy," she went on oblivious to the squall of horror spreading across my face. Not an iota of sympathy for the poor writhing kittens but only her distaste about the mess. Here were we standing surrounded by the ultimate in modern agricultural technology chatting about bizarre customs like hacking off feline tails. Some readers will suspect I'm making this up. But I can assure you that if you scratch a little beneath the surface of Japan you'll find the Japanese are, despite their technological advances, an incredibly superstitious lot.

Long-tailed cats are supposedly unlucky which is why you see many stumpy-tailed cats prowling around. Many are actually born this way; nature's revenge to stop grandma getting her kicks with the kitchen knife perhaps. Cats are supposed to have a huge mouth to gobble up people who ill-treat them (tail-logging doesn't fall into this category which

renders grandma immune and free to pursue her blood-thirsty habits). Ghost cats (*bake neko*) are said to haunt people while a more friendly image is portrayed by the paw-saluting *maneki neko* which adorns many shops and eateries. The action of a cat washing its face is similar to a welcoming gesture. People hope that by keeping a maneki neko on display it will invite customers i.e. money and fortune.

Cats are not the only animals to feature in the folklore and superstitions of the Japanese. As in the West the fox (*kitsune*) is a prominent character. Inari Shrines up and down the country are full of fox statues and are visited by merchants praying (hoping) for commercial prosperity. Foxfire (*kitsune-bi*) a phosphorescent bluish fire which breaks out in unexpected places, moves slowly and burns nothing is thought to be fire stolen from shrines by foxes. More likely foxes rummaging around in a graveyard unearthed a few human bones and by trundling them across the ground sparked off some friction causing these mysterious fires. Some people are said to be possessed by a fox's spirit (*kitsune mochi*). Whole families along the Japan Sea coast are discriminated against because the fox's spirit run in their blood. It passes from one generation to the next. Other individuals possess the fox's spirit which enables them to communicate with the dead. If you're desperate to talk to someone on the 'other' side you approach a *konkon-san* (usually represented by some wizened *obaa-san*) who acts as a medium. Konkon echoes the sound a fox makes.

The fox, badger (*tanuki*) and beaver (*karwauiso*) are trio known as tricksters or pranksters bent on deceiving people. Stories abound of gullible young men being offered gold by a luscious maiden (one of the trio disguised) and just as they're about to rush home to tell friends and family of their incredible fortune, they are left standing with a handful of dead leaves. Whereas the fox is all cunning, the tanuki is a bit naughty. Tanuki statues (manufactured at a great rate in the pottery town of Shigaraki) are displayed outside and inside boozing haunts. Waving a

stone jar of sake and grinning from ear to ear they also flaunt outsized.... well next time you pass one have a look.

The rat is the messenger boy of the Daikoku god, the god of Fortune. Since rice is synonymous with money the rat carries a huge sack of rice on his back and a handy mallet which he swings from time to time. Every time it strikes the sack, money pours out. Mice and rats are fine when they are bringing you lots of money, they are less desirable when they take up residence in your house. Old farmhouses are riddled with rodents all competing for space under the thatch to bring up their families. Enter the snake. Snakes also like the cosines of an under-roof residence especially when there's a steady menu of mice available at all times. As long as they remain out of sight Japanese welcome snakes in the house. White snakes are regarded as sacred and should one die or be inadvertently killed, it is considered an ill omen. A shed snake skin is instantly pounced upon as lucky. Kept in one's purse it attracts more money. A snake seen first thing in the morning means good business that day.

Many snake or reptile potions, lotions and powders exist in Chinese medicine. It is believed that to counteract poison i.e something physically wrong with you, you should take poison. If you feel your love life is taking a downward turn how about trying some powdered *mamushi* available at any Chinese pharmacy. It's supposed to be a great body revitaliser especially the pink *mamushi* variety. And if your girlfriend is casting longing glances around at other blokes, losing interest in you perhaps, slip some roasted newt powder into her coffee when she isn't looking and wait for results. Should all these fail you can always fall back on a meal of blow fish (*fugu*), eel (*unagi*) or snapping turtle blood (*suppon*) to boost your energy. Whether or not it's wise to take any of these in combination I wouldn't know but maybe safer to sample them one by one. *Mamushi zake* or snake dunked in alcohol is a great re-vitaliser or cure for coughs and colds as well as (some claim) an aphrodisiac. Another

pick-me-up is earthworm tea (*mimizu*). *Geisha*, opera singers or those who use their voices a lot drink mimizu tea to relieve exhaustion and hoarseness. They also say it miraculously produces a finer voice as a result.

Snakes eat frogs, frogs consume slugs, slugs can blind snakes, thus a balance is maintained. When you build anything like a stonewall you should keep the snake/frog/slug equation in mind to achieve perfect balance. Finally, May is the month when carp pennants flutter all over Japan as a symbol of the Boys' Festival. The carp is noted for its agility in swimming upstream leaping over whatever obstacle lies in its way. It can even scale waterfalls. Parents fly carp streamers in the hope that their son(s) will rise high on the technological wave (perhaps leaving grandma's superstitions behind too).

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