

The Sociology of Pets in Contemporary Japan

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This book project focuses on the embeddedness and changing role of pets in Japanese society.

More pets than kids: Since 1990 Japan has tried (unsuccessfully) to battle a decline in the fertility rate, a situation further strained by the recent pandemic. In 2021, a total of 7 million dogs and almost 9 million cats lived in Japanese homes. That same year saw a record low number of 811,604 babies born in Japan and a record high number in new pet ownership: A total of 886,000 newly bought or adopted furry family members surpassed the number of babies born that year.

11.3% of the population own dogs, 9.8% cats

Data and Methods

This research project employs a multi-method approach and uses data from a multitude of sources:

- Quantitative analysis of statistical data
- Qualitative interviews of pet guardians, animal welfare activists, people in the pet business and stakeholders in administration
- Participant observation at adoption events, in pet stores, in pet cafés, and at pet-related public events

Research themes

The study of pets in society ties into the fields of human-animal studies, family sociology, social movement studies, demography, legal studies, urban sociology, as well as the sociology of happiness and well-being. The book covers this in the following chapters:

- ◆ Doing family with pets
- ◆ Aging Japan and pets
- ◆ Pets in popular culture
- ◆ Pets and disaster times
- ◆ Pets and animal welfare groups
- ◆ The pet economy
- ◆ Pets and happiness
- ◆ Pets, politics, and the changing legal landscape
- ◆ Japan's urban / rural divide seen through pets



Shrine visit with pet in Tokyo © all photos B. Holthus

Pet economy

50.9% of all dogs in Japan are bought at a pet store



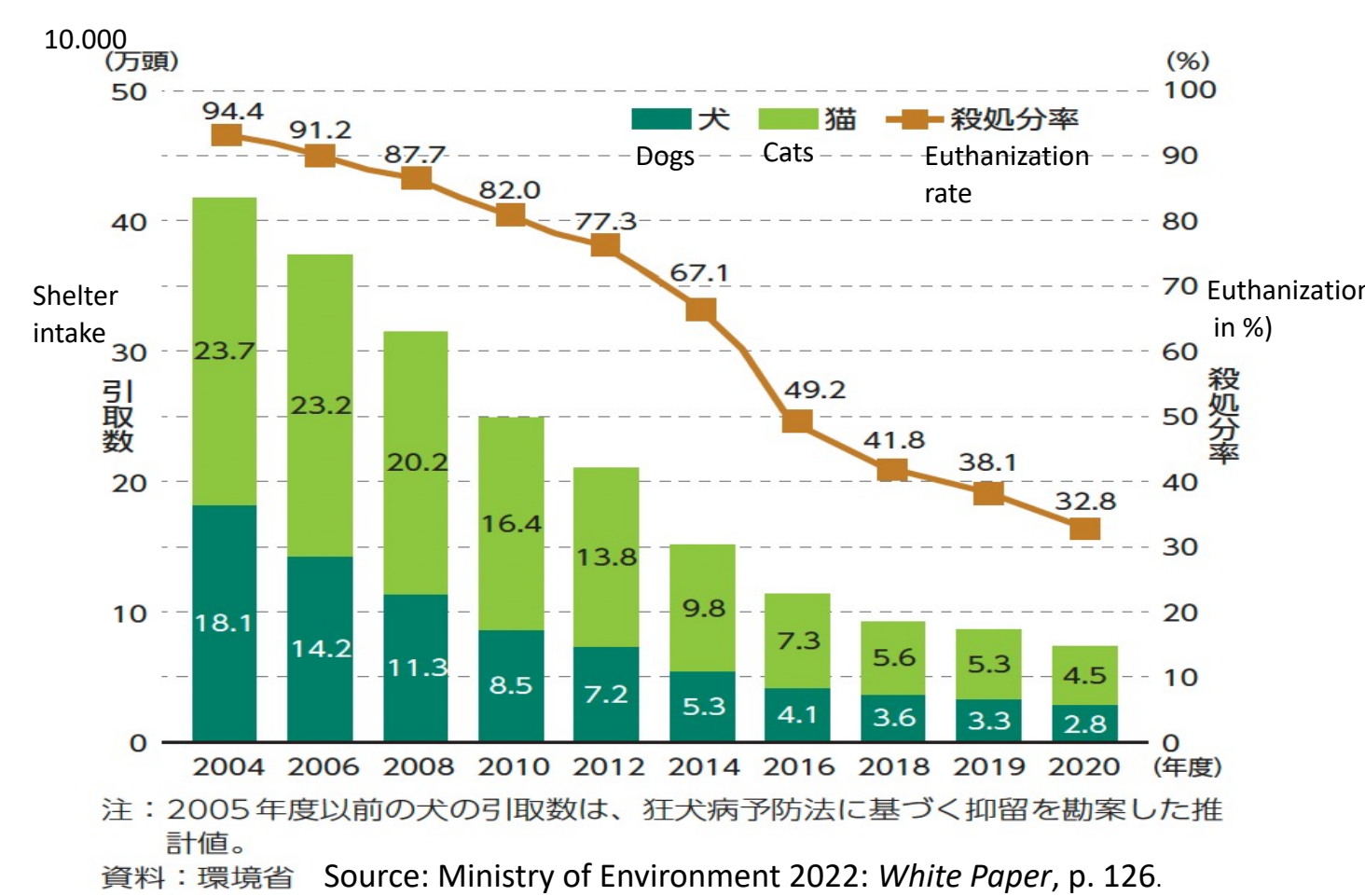
Pet store, animal products, animal friendly establishments, and pets in advertisement



Estimated pet market value in 2022: Yen 1,68 trillion (\$6,7 billion)

Pet-related "battlegrounds"

Decline in shelter intake and drastic decline in euthanasia



Political campaigning against euthanasia



Elderly guardian and her dog in Tokyo

Info sheets for shelter pet adoptions

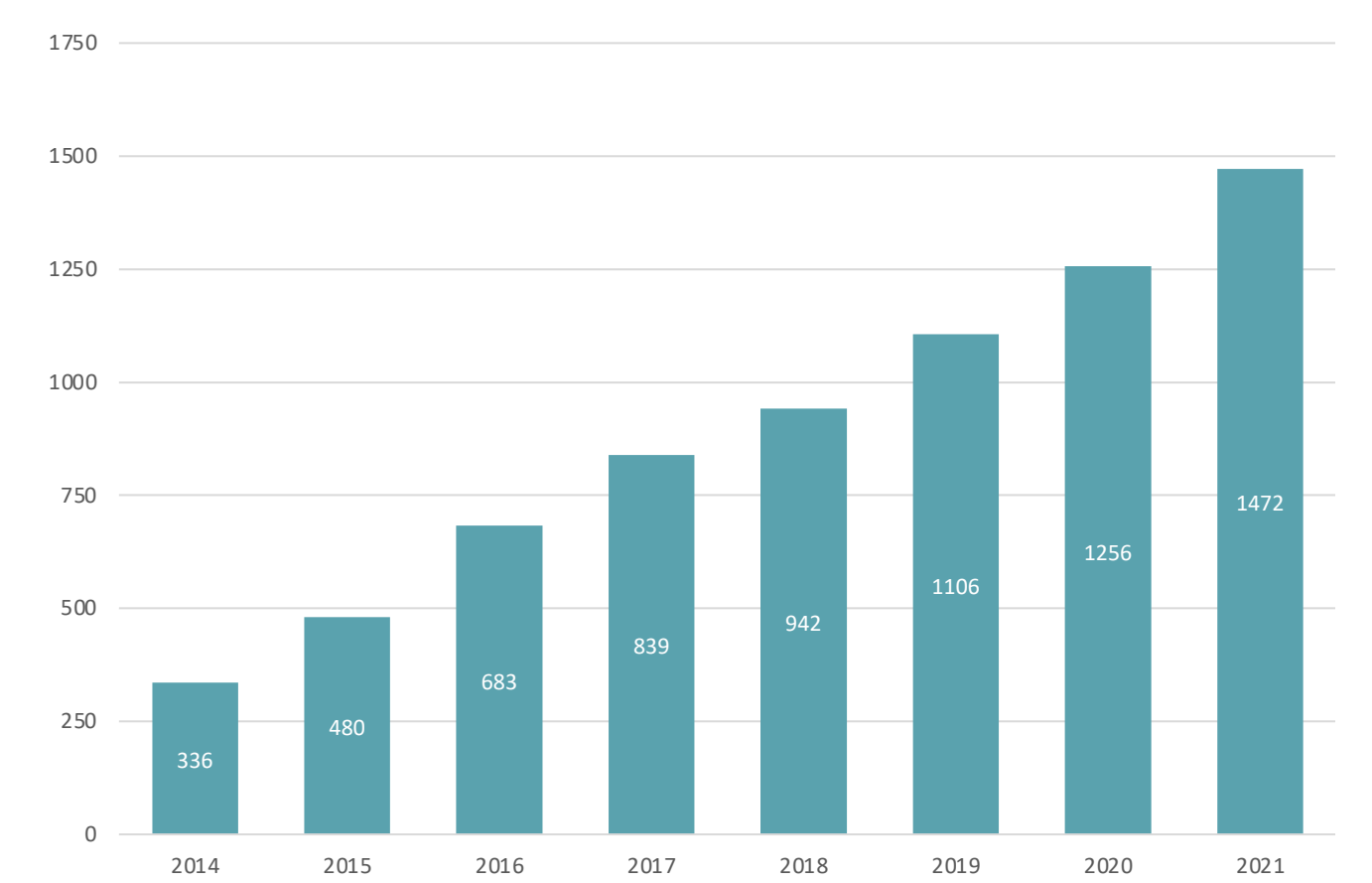


"Take dog poop home": Policing public space

Guidelines for disaster prevention for humans and pets



2022 Awareness campaign for neighborhood cats without owners



Number of animal welfare organizations

Some findings

- Japan has seen a rise in pet ownership in the last decade, a booming pet market and pet cafés as well as greater acceptance of pets in the cityscape. Awareness of animal welfare issues in society is growing and by now, most larger political parties have added animal welfare to their manifestos. Recent legal changes further reflect the heightened role of pets.
- While the rate of unmarried Japanese is increasing, it is telling that the largest share of dog owners in Japan is in the age-group 20 to 29 years. All the while, Japanese over the age of 60 are barred from adopting a pet from animal welfare organizations, despite research identifying the positive correlation between pet ownership and well-being among elderly people.
- Overall the urban and rural differences in pet-keeping norms and the understanding of animal welfare are significant.
- While mental health problems are becoming less stigmatized and more recognized in Japanese society, animal hoarding is also becoming a more widely identified problem as well.

