

Pet ownership and Asian multiculturalism

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Australia's geographical proximity to Asia has led to increasing ties between Australia and our Asian neighbours in terms of trade, cultural exchange, education and immigration. Coupled with diminishing ties with Australia's traditional partners and a growing Republican movement, the Australia of 1998 is modern, multicultural and democratic. Australian life reflects the customs, religions, food and fashions of the many different nationalities and ethnic groups which have migrated to Australia since colonisation plus those of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This mix of cultures sometimes leads to challenges which need to be met if all Australians are to live together in peace and harmony.

Pet ownership is one area where cultural and religious differences may influence the choice of pets owned, the purpose for which they may be kept and influence how the pets are kept and cared for. Domesticated animals have been described as cultural artefacts of human society (Clutton-Brock, 1992). On a smaller scale, domestic pets probably reflect the cultural practices of the home in which they are raised. Therefore, it is likely that Asian multiculturalism in Australia will mean that veterinarians, rangers and other government personnel, pet breeders and merchandisers, dog trainers and the general public need to recognise the impact of culture on pet ownership and respond appropriately and sensitively to the needs and problems which may arise. 'Western style' pet ownership may also benefit from exposure to pet ownership which is influenced by different racial, religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Little information appears to be available on this issue and hopefully this paper will encourage more detailed studies which would provide hard data from which firm conclusions could be drawn. It is also beyond the scope of this paper to examine pet ownership in individual ethnic or cultural groups in any depth given the wide number of ethnic and cultural groups from the Asian region which are represented in Australia. Religious diversity within these groups may also affect attitudes to pet ownership. To further complicate this, attitudes are probably markedly affected by other factors such as education, socio-economic status, degree of assimilation into a 'western' culture, exposure to colonial cultures and length of time spent in Australia or other 'Westernised' countries.

I see this area as being important for a number of reasons. People who may traditionally be seen as being primarily associated with the care of animals may contribute on a wider scale to the welfare of society. This is timely given the Government's recently launched program 'Living in Harmony' which is designed to overcome racism in Australia today. Pet ownership may not previously have been seen as an area where contributions to racial and ethnic harmony could be made. Given the high level of pet ownership in Australia, the very high standard of veterinary care available to most animals and the presence of progressive animal legislation and education programs, I believe pet ownership is an area of Australian life that should be happy and rewarding for all Australians who choose to own a companion animal. *In addition, processes that increase our understanding of the human-companion animal bond are likely to also enhance animal welfare.*

Asian Multiculturalism

The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines Asia as:

South East Asia	North East Asia	Southern Asia
Brunei Cambodia Indonesia Laos Malaysia Myanmar Philippines Singapore Thailand Vietnam	China Taiwan Hong Kong Japan Korea (North and South) Macau Mongolia	Afghanistan Bangladesh Bhutan India Maldives Nepal Pakistan Sri Lanka

'Multicultural' is defined as 'of or relating to or constituting several cultural or ethnic groups within a society' (Oxford Dictionary).

THE ROLE OF RELIGION

Religion has traditionally been interwoven with culture in Asian societies. Some of the religions important in the Asian region include:

Religions of East Asia	Religions of India	Middle Eastern Religions which have spread to the region
Taoism Confucianism (Optimistic Humanism) Shinto	Hinduism Jainism Buddhism Sikhism	Islam Judaism Christianity

Traditional totemism and animism

Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Jainism encourage but do not demand vegetarianism. The four 'vegetarian' religions:

1. originated in India (though Taosim became established in China at an early date);
2. believe in the sanctity of all life (whereas in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the 'Thou shalt not kill' refers to humans only);
3. substitute animal flesh with soy foods, dhal or lentils;
4. believe in reincarnation (this means an animal may have the soul of a friend or relative as opposed to the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic belief that only people have souls and there is no reincarnation);
5. have a doctrine of karma (where the fruits of a person's action in this life are seen in the next; this means that a stray or unwanted animal may have the soul of a person who committed wrongs in a past life and it is therefore their 'fate' to be a stray dog);
6. are characterised by reluctance to keep companion animals (Jainism contains a tacit prohibition not to interfere in the lives of other creatures) (Berry, 1994).

The concept of *ahimsa* or non-violence or non-killing has influenced lives and shaped societies throughout Asia in the same way that the precepts of Christianity are integral to the moral code and laws of much of the European world (at least in the past). However, even within the religions there will be differences. For example, the attitudes of a fundamentalist Christian may vary enormously from a liberal Christian and the same for a Muslim, etc.

Some religions have prohibitions associated with certain species of animals. For example, dogs are regarded as impure by Moslems because it is believed that their saliva is a risk to human health. Therefore, dogs are not often kept as pets, whereas cats are favoured. However, the Koran does allow dogs to be kept for purposes such as hunting or protection. Moslems have a duty to all animals including dogs. One holy story relates that a pupil of The Prophet was in the desert and was thirsty and sought water from the well. He then saw a dog which was panting and thirsty and the pupil went back to the well and carried water to the dog in his shoe. He later asked The Prophet if he had done wrong. The Prophet answered that God would have mercy on people who showed mercy to animals.

Hinduism is a practical family-oriented religion incorporating a caste system where animals have a purpose and even the sacred cow is a utility animal. Although, the dog is recorded as having high status in The Mahabaradha (one of the Books of Hinduism), dogs would not be kept a 'playthings'. The Hindu belief in reincarnation is explained in the Chandogya Upanishad: "Thou who are of pleasant conduct ... will enter a pleasant womb, ... the womb of a Brahmin ... but those who are of stinking conduct ... will enter the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine, or the womb of an outcast" (Noss, 1980).

Judaism forbids the eating of pig meat on health grounds and pigs are unlikely to be kept as pets (this also applies to Moslems). Judaeo-Christian tradition has the underlying Old Testament decree that humans will have dominion over the animals (Genesis 1:28) and that only human life is sacred. St Thomas Aquinas (c1225-74) said, "God has subjected all things to man's power". This sense of separation of humans from the animal world in Judaeo-Christian and Islamic cultures and no belief in reincarnation is an important difference to Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Jainism.

ATTITUDES TO COMPANION ANIMALS IN ASIA

Perhaps the most important thing to appreciate is the diversity of attitudes and practices which reflect the wide cultural, religious, racial and ethnic groups represented in the Asian region. As mentioned, there will be differences associated with education, socio-economic status and 'westernisation'. As in Australia, attitudes towards animals may be greatly influenced by whether the person is a city-dweller or a farmer.

The following generalisations about attitudes to companion animals in Asia may be useful as long as their limitations are acknowledged. It should be understood that the generalisations are about as accurate as saying that Australia is a hot country or that Australians love football and meat pies:

1. Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists and Jainists may not accept the concept of euthanasia even in the face of animal suffering - this belief in the sanctity of life is akin to Christians who oppose abortion and euthanasia in humans;
2. in developing countries or countries ravaged by war, companion animals may not be a priority in terms of health care, welfare legislation and public budgets;
3. stray animals may be dealt with in ways which would be regarded in Australia as inhumane but which reflect the huge number of animals involved and the threat to human health (rabies etc);
4. greater public acceptance of stray and roaming dogs and cats;
5. companion animals may be kept but the bond with the animal may differ to the 'western-style' bond which is often highly emotional and characterised by the pet being dependent on the owner and the owner regarding the pet much like a surrogate child. Traditionally companion animals in Asian societies have usually had purposes beyond simply being a 'pet' and indulgence of pets is not typical;
6. most Asian countries do not have social welfare systems - the individual or the individual's family must take responsibility for the health and welfare of a person. It is possible that this attitude helps account for the acceptance of large numbers of stray dogs and cats which are often in ill health;

7. animals which are regarded as companion animals in Australia such as dogs may be used for meat and meat products for both humans and animals in parts of Asia. It is believed that dog merapid rises in disposable income and education in the past few decades in countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong have lead to rapid embracement of dog and cat ownership at is a 'warm' meat that is best eaten in winter;
8. 'western style';
9. the types of animals which have been traditionally kept may differ. For example, the Chinese have historically kept koi and birds and are very adept in their management. The koi live for hundreds of years and are passed from one generation to another;
10. acceptance of the notion that animals may spread diseases which are potentially fatal whereas in Australia people appear to take for granted that Australia is free of the majority of zoonoses like rabies etc;
11. most Asian counties have less rigorous anti-cruelty laws than Australia;
12. there are welfare problems associated with the growing number of pedigree dogs and cats imported from countries like Australia into Asian countries to meet the needs of the affluent middle class.

PET OWNERSHIP AND ATTITUDES IN SOME SPECIFIC ASIAN CULTURES

China

There are no SPCAs, shelters or animal cruelty laws (outside Hong Kong). Officials deal with stray dogs by beating and similar methods. Not many dogs are licensed as the fee in the cities can be more than a month's wage for the average worker (<http://www.earth.org.hk/petfair97.html>). As in some other parts of Asia, cats and dogs are openly slaughtered in markets for human consumption.

Guam

Although Guam is in Micronesia and not included in the Asian region, its proximity to Asia and the availability of hard data warrants its inclusion for the purpose of this lecture. The island of Guam has a population of Caucasians, Chamorros (natives of Guam), Filipinos and Micronesian Islanders. The population is 140,000 people with 30,000 dogs and an equal number of cats. A structured questionnaire revealed:

- 48.1% of respondents owned pets with only 26% of Micronesian Islander owning pets;
- more than 50% of all dogs were kept exclusively outside, 30% were free to roam and 46.2% were tied with a rope or chain with a mean length of 10 feet;
- 5.5% of Micronesian Islanders, 46% of Filipinos and 30% of Chamorros but no Caucasians kept dogs solely for protection;
- 60% of Caucasians kept their cats indoors only while among both Chamorros and Micronesian Islanders indoor/outdoor states depended on whether the cat was pedigree or mixed bred (Diaz et al, 1997).

Japan

While there are fewer pet owners in Japan than in the United States, the keeping of indigenous Japanese dog breeds along with those common in Europe and North America is long established. Japan has a centralised governmental network of animal shelters where records show that the numbers of dogs being admitted and euthanased has fallen significantly over a recent ten year period. In the city of Tokyo, kittens account for the majority of animals impounded. Spaying and neutering of dogs and cats are not widespread practices and the government shelters usually do not offer the animals for adoption though this practice seems to be increasing (Hart et al, 1998).

Malaysia

Malaysia has three main ethnic groups - Indians, Malays and Chinese. The Indians largely are Hindu or Christian, the Malays are Muslim and the Chinese are Buddhist or Christian. The Malays do not tend to own dogs and prefer cat ownership. Many Malays react with fear if confronted by a dog. This is the case even in the veterinary waiting room where there is a high likelihood that dogs will be encountered. The Malays tend to own many cats and also feed strays. Cats are often kept in cages of about 3ft x 2ft and are regarded much like exhibits in a zoo, though some are taken in and out and handled. The Malays generally do not agree with euthanasia and believe that only Allah should give and take life. Often the Imam will need to be called in to give his blessing for ending an animal's suffering. Hindu pet owners generally do not see euthanasia as an option but usually this abhorrence is less than that felt by Buddhists (pers. comm.).

Malaysians generally have fenced yards and compounds and pets are not allowed to roam. Toy dogs are mainly house dogs whereas the larger breeds are generally kept outside. Dogs may also be kept in cages and are commonly kept on chains, especially guard dogs. There is a high crime rate so there is a tendency for high fences and big dogs. The SPCA is concerned with chains but the general public is usually accepting of this practice. There is a public education scheme for neutering and the SPCA arranges subsidised neutering.

There are many stray dogs which roam the streets. Rangers routinely round up and shoot these dogs even in populated areas and in front of children. There are welfare problems associated with the high number of expensive pedigree imported dogs which are often not of good quality. The level of husbandry for fish and bird keeping appears more knowledgeable than that for dogs (pers. comm.).

Singapore

Pet ownership in Singapore probably most closely mirrors the situation in Australia. Singapore is a very 'Westernised' and affluent Asian country which is also geographically close to Australia. Singaporeans are well educated and enjoy a high standard of living and the companion animal bond is very 'Westernised'. Singapore does not have a huge stray dog problem but there are many stray cats (pers.comm.).

Thailand

Euthanasia of animals is repugnant to Buddhists who comprise most of the population. Veterinarians often provide facilities similar to a hospice where owners, usually the women, bring in the terminally ill pets which are then given supportive care in an annexe to the main hospital. It is a social scene where the women sit and do handicraft and talk to each other about their pets' condition. Veterinarians resort to circumventing the need for euthanasia by treating the pain and suffering of the animal first without regard to the side effects which might shorten life (as might a Catholic doctor). This is very different to Christian cultures where veterinarians openly talk about and recommend euthanasia (pers.comm.).

Bangkok has six low cost clinics and there has been a recent proposal by the government health adviser to pay residents to have their animals neutered making Bangkok the first city in the world to do this (the amount suggested was 50 baht which is about \$2.00). Bangkok is already providing free vaccination and veterinary services and the new scheme would add to the proposals in place to control the city's stray dog population of about 1.3 million (there are about 3.5 million dogs in Bangkok which share the city with some 5.5. million humans). More than 50,000 dogs a year are caught and kept in the city shelter (<http://x3.dejanews.com>).

Stray dogs are killed if not claimed or adopted within three days. The success of the low cost neutering clinics and public tolerance of free-roaming dogs is reflected in the Bangkok animal control killing ratio of approximately 9 per 1,000 human residents, which is lower than that of any United States cities except for San Francisco, New York, San Diego and Seattle. About 14 million people per year require post-exposure rabies vaccinations in Thailand, with 70 to 80 people per year dying of the disease. The Veterinary Practitioners Association of Thailand is campaigning for microchip identification to be added to the cost of services provided to dogs at the city clinics (<http://x3.dejanews.com>).

The situation in Bangkok is different to North Eastern Thailand where dog-eating was introduced by Vietnamese refugees. Stray dogs were eaten and now this supply is exhausted dog meat is sold and costs as much as beef. Dog meat is also used as a protein supplement for cattle, fish and even for other dogs. The hide is used for bags and drum skins and the scrotums become golfers' gloves. Dried penises are exported to China and Taiwan where some people believe they enhance sexual prowess when consumed. Before slaughter, the dogs are not fed for three days to induce submission (<http://x3.dejanews.com>).

PET OWNERSHIP IN AUSTRALIA BY ASIAN AUSTRALIANS

Pet ownership will probably be affected to a certain extent by the length of time the owner or his or her family has been in Australia. A second generation Asian-Australian may be indistinguishable from a second generation Australian of European descent (but this would also be affected by the degree of assimilation, pre existing 'westernisation', socio-economic factors, education etc.). Comparisons are difficult because attitudes to pet ownership by European-Australians also vary widely. In addition, Australians of European descent may now more than ever also embrace non Judaeo-Christian religions and this will also affect attitudes.

Asian Australians who are new to Australia and who were refugees may have very different attitudes to Asian Australians whose arrival has not been as sudden and dramatic and who may have studied or have relatives here. Problems may result if people are not aware of relevant legislation such as the Dog Act. When people are unable to speak or understand English such problems may be more prevalent. Although Australia is multicultural, it is not very common to have signs and other public communications in any other language except English.

Programs in schools, such as Pet Pep - Pets and People (Evans, 1991), mean that children have access to information on how to be responsible pet owners and what attitudes and practices are appropriate in Australia and it is likely that such information is then relayed home.

Available living space probably dictated what animals have been traditionally kept in Asian countries. Many people may be more experienced, therefore, with fish, bird and cat husbandry, with only the wealthy having access to large dogs. In Australia, success may be seen as having access to more space and land and the opportunity to own a bigger animal such as a large dog. Problems may result if the person is sold a dog which is not suitable in terms of the person's experience.

It has been my observation as a veterinarian and also that of my colleagues, that Asian Australians are often very keen to do 'the right thing' by their pets and are anxious to own animals which are well groomed, clean and cared for. However, as with other Australians, this may be more a reflection of the attitudes of any person who takes an animal to the veterinarian. Attitudes of pet owners who don't use a veterinarian may be different.

WHAT TO DO WHEN PROBLEMS ARISE

Veterinarians, rangers and local government personnel may be involved when pet ownership goes wrong. Neighbours may be involved in disputes. When the owners are Asian Australians it may be difficult to address problems which might more easily be solved if the person was an Australian of European descent. The situation becomes more complex if language is a barrier and if the owner is culturally and religiously different. Unfortunately, some sections of the Australian community believe in zero migration and may highlight pet ownership problems as being part of some general perceived unsuitability of Asian people to Australian life.

Guidelines for successful outcomes to problems involving Asian Australians and their pets include:

- a. recognising cultural, religious and ethnic differences but avoiding unhelpful generalisations and stereotyping (for example, Asians eat dog meat);
- b. liaise with community leaders so you can work within the system and do not inadvertently offend or frighten;
- c. employ the services of an interpreter if necessary rather than gesticulating and getting nowhere;
- d. be respectful of other cultures and races and avoid jumping to conclusions (for example, the dog is kept on a chain - therefore, it is not cared for);
- e. use non-discriminatory and culturally inclusive language. For example:
 - (i) avoid referring to the ethnic and racial background of a person or group unless for a valid reason;
 - (ii) the term 'Asians' is often used inappropriately to refer to people from different cultures, such as China, Japan and India (use the term only when it is not possible to use anything but a collective term);
 - (iii) avoid inappropriate generalisations about ethnicity and religion (for example, not all Muslims are Arabic or Turkish);
 - (iv) do specify a person's ethnicity by using a qualifying adjective, such as 'Chinese Australian';
 - (v) avoid using physical features to describe a person (for example, 'slanted eyes');
 - (vi) avoid talking about cultural practices out of context;

(Murdoch University, 1997).

- f. try and place yourself in the position of the person whose cultural practices seem different and examine whether your own culture's practice might be viewed as less than desirable (for example, Australians keep birds in small cages, the French eat horse meat, Australians eat lamb);
- g. be empathetic - try to understand why Asian Australians may react differently to situations involving animals than might a European or 'Westernised Asian' Australian (for example, an Asian Australian who is a Moslem may be very fearful and upset if a neighbour's dog enters his family's yard; an Asian Australian who is a Buddhist may be horrified that a neighbour wants the local stray cats euthanased). As mentioned before, it should be noted that a European Australian who is a Moslem or a Buddhist may react in the manner just outlined. However, the European Australian may understand the local government system better and feel less fear or agitation.

CONCLUSION

Pet ownership is an area, like parenting, where people seem to draw judgments quickly and sometimes harshly. This is often done before placing the practice or attitude in question in the context in which the practices and attitudes developed. Unfortunately, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions because much of the information available is anecdotal. Research on 'pet ownership' in Asian societies and in Australia is required to define more clearly if there are areas which represent challenges and then examine the best ways to meet these challenges.

'Living in Harmony' should be the goal of all Australians. Pet ownership is a rich and rewarding aspect of Australian life and one which should be available, if wanted, to all Australians. If there is a learning curve for some Asian Australians this should be addressed sensitively and with respect. This provides a great opportunity for veterinarians, rangers, local government personnel and members of the public to contribute to Australia's future as a multicultural nation as well as enhancing the welfare of companion animals.

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I would like to thank veterinarians Peter Irwin and Veronica Anderson for their information regarding Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, Mrs Shantkumari Adams regarding information on Hinduism, Mr Abdul Jalil Ahmad of the Islamic Council of WA for his information on Islam, Father Aloysius Leong for both theological and general information and the overseas veterinary students at Murdoch University for their help and guidance with the paper. I would especially like to thank my assistant, Mrs Maud Lowe, for her tireless efforts researching this topic and for typing the manuscript with precision.

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