

# Japanese Animal Cafes and the Iyashi Boom

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Though the very first cat cafés were Taiwanese, when Japanese entrepreneurs brought the idea of a café where visitors could relax with a drink and a cat nearby to Japan in the mid-2000s, the idea caught on quickly. The popularity of this new business model was tied to Japan's *iyashi*, healing, boom, in which Japanese people turned to commercial businesses to meet their need for emotional and psychological soothing to help them deal with stress. People in Japan found that a stop at a café at the end of the day and the chance to relax and pet a cat is a perfect balm for a busy worker and these businesses have today become a popular part of Japanese life. After the first cat café opened in Osaka, Japan in the fall of 2004, it was followed quickly by cafés in Tokyo and other major cities, causing what the Japanese mass media dubbed a “cat café boom” by 2008. During the cat café peak, there were dozens of cat cafés in Tokyo alone. While the numbers have decreased somewhat from 2009, there are still roughly forty established cat cafés in Tokyo today [\[Figure 1\]](#).

Cat cafés have become so popular in Japan that many new types of animal cafés have opened over the last decade, capitalizing on the interest in unusual opportunities for human-animal interaction. The first rabbit cafés began to appear at the end of the 2000s [\[Figure 2\]](#), and the first owl café opened in 2012 [\[Figure 3\]](#). Today, there are scores of cat cafés open throughout Japan, though they are most densely clustered in major cities like Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya. There are even reptile cafés or zoo cafés, which do not limit themselves to a single species. Both the popularity and public awareness of animal cafés has only increased in the last ten years, both inside and outside of Japan, as new cat cafés have begun to open across Europe and North America.

Animal café are spaces structured around the opportunity for intimacy with animals but in a public, communal setting. The experience is both relaxing and enlivening, as visitors get the opportunity to cozy up with exciting, new animals. About the size of a large studio apartment, painted in pastel colors, and filled with soft couches, most cafés are designed to look more like a comfortable home than a traditional café. Visitors pay for the time they are in the café, staying an average of one and a half hours, and they use that time to watch, play with, or even just relax while the animals that surround them [\[Figure 4\]](#). There are bookshelves filled with books, magazines and *manga* (Japanese comic books) available for customers to entertain themselves with and most animal cafés also offer some food or drink [\[Figure 5\]](#). However, visiting a café is about being with animals and other animal lovers, more than it is about having a good meal or enjoying other kinds of entertainment.

Most visitors come alone or with a single friend or significant other, and generally spend their time in quiet relaxation. Patrons chat occasionally with their companion or other people in the café, but primarily just enjoy the atmosphere. There are no prescribed rules for how visitors should behave in an animal café, and visitors are encouraged to relax in and enjoy the space however they wish to do so. For some visitors, that means interacting with as many animals as possible, petting them or taking pictures, and then sharing those pictures with a friend while they chat together over a cup of coffee. For others, that means stopping by after a hard day at work and curling up in a corner with a *manga*, and a cat sleeping nearby. Animal cafés are flexible spaces, where customers who want to be alone can focus on quiet and relaxation, and those who want to be social can socialize with the animals or with other patrons or employees.

In order to keep the café from feeling overcrowded and losing the sense of intimacy, cafés only allow a limited number of visitors in at any one time, usually no more than a dozen people. In a cat café, these visitors are surrounded by the cats that live there; there are on average about ten cats, of a variety of breeds (Maine Coons, Bengals, and Munchkins are very popular). The cats roam freely throughout the café, sometimes stopping to be pet by visitors, but often curling up on high shelves or in cat trees. Rabbit cafés follow a similar pattern, but rabbits are more quickly overtired and so rotate between resting in cages and hopping around the café space. In contrast, owl and bird cafés keep the animals in areas separate from the café section where customers can handle them for short periods under the supervision of café staff. The animals at the majority of Japanese cat cafés are raised from a young age in the café, live there full time, and are not adopted out. Regular visitors often develop close relationships with one particular animal, who they see as “their” animal, and who they come to spend time with when they visit.

These cafés are structured to allow visitors the opportunity to remove themselves from the tensions of their everyday lives and relax in a pleasantly social setting, enjoying the benefits of social contact with animals. In addition to the cozy decorations, there are also at least two or three café employees, who bring drinks, but also chat with the clientele, answer their questions about the animals, and facilitate the interactions between visitors and animals by showing them how the animal likes to be petted or which toy is their favorite. Employees are trained to be attentive to the moods and needs of customers and be as interactive as the customer wishes, offering them a companionable ear or complete privacy [\[Figure 6\]](#). The café owners who created these cafés, the employees who make visitors comfortable, and the animals who allow themselves to be petted and play with the customers all work together to create a refuge for visitors who come to the animal cafés to escape the stresses of everyday life in twenty-first century Japan.

## Changing Sociality in Post-Economic Bubble Japan

Animal cafés welcome visitors of all ages, from middle-schoolers to retirees, but they are most popular with young people, both men and women, in their 20s and 30s. This generation came of age following the end of the economic boom period, and life in post-recession Japan has had significant effects on them, social as well as economic. They face not only a challenging work environment, as there is decreasing access to stable, full-time employment, but also the loss social support networks, affected by the delay in marriage, decreasing birth rate, and the end of the “company-as-family” ideology. The young people who came of age in the 1990s and after, sometimes referred to as the “lost generation,” are struggling to find new social support structures to replace the ones built around corporations and family, and new sources of stress reduction to help them face the challenges of life in contemporary Japan. Experiences that offer low-key sociality, combining community and relaxation, like time spent in an animal café, are increasingly popular among this generation of Japanese workers because they offer the positive feelings of intimacy that are hard for many Japanese to find elsewhere. The animal café offers a place that is away from the workplace, a major source of stress for younger precariously-employed workers, and home, which offers little comfort or social support to young Japanese who live alone. It is a place where visitors can relax and let go of their daily stress, while still comfortably being with other people.

During the economic boom period, which began after Japan’s postwar recovery in the 1960s and 1970s and ended in 1990, there was a reliance on corporate loyalty and family care to compensate for a minimal welfare state (Borovoy 2012). The Japanese economy was built around the lifetime-employment system, in which male employees were hired when they graduated from college, and they would work for the same corporation for the duration of their careers. These salarymen were paid a sufficient wage to support a family, and their wives in turn maintained the household and helped their children develop the credentials that would allow them also to attain a corporate position. While this lifestyle was only ever attainable by a portion of Japanese workers, the ideology built around the idea that if one worked hard and did well in school, one would have a secure future was highly influential for young people born in the 1970s and 1980s. However, in an effort to respond to the economic crisis by increasing flexibility in the labor force, Japanese employers have increased the number of part-time, temporary or dispatched (*haken*) workers. While older workers, hired during the period of lifetime-guaranteed employment, still benefit from the corporate welfare system, younger workers do not have access to those protections and face significantly more economic instability than the older generation. According to the most recent

Japanese government White Paper on Labour Force from 2014, 36.7% of employees are non-regular staffs and employees, a more than 6% increase from ten years ago. Twenty percent of the young people working in sales and service work are in that type of job "involuntarily," because they could not find employment at a regular company. More and more employees are shifted into flexible employment, reducing these stable regular positions for all workers. Even those with full-time jobs face more stress in the workplace, as fewer options for workers means that there is more pressure on people to market themselves successfully and they must take on the responsibility to care for their social and emotional needs.

Young Japanese workers are thus faced with the challenges of financial insecurity, and a sense of disaffection as they have come to realize that their dream of a stable future as part of a corporation, something they would be able to earn as long as they studied and worked hard, is no longer possible for a large proportion of Japanese workers. Young Japanese people are searching for opportunities for positive social interaction to help them deal with these feelings of disconnection and loneliness. They are turning to the marketplace for it, willing to pay for the experiences that they do not get elsewhere. This leads them to turn to business like animal cafés, which offer them that positive experience.

Animal cafés' target clientele are men and women in their 20s and 30s who seek to reduce their feelings of anxiety through time spent in a companionable, relaxing space. They are often working in high-stress jobs and lack the time to socialize with friends after work. Additionally, animal cafés are clustered in cities like Tokyo which are heavily populated by people who moved to urban areas for work and left behind family and childhood friends, so are more likely to feel lonely or isolated.

## **Animal Cafés and the *Iyashi* Boom**

The current success of the animal café is part of a larger explosion of interest in goods, businesses, and places that offer positive, healing experiences: known in Japan as the "*iyashi*" boom. All of the factors that make animal cafés so appealing to customers - the opportunity to interact with animals, a space within which customers can relax and chat with friends, the cozy feel - are involved in making an animal café a place to receive *iyashi*. *Iyashi*, the noun form of the verb *iyasu*, to cure, fix, soothe, is usually translated as "healing" but it carries the connotation of both physical and mental mending.

The term first came into common parlance during the "*iyashi* boom," which began in the mid-1990s. The timeline of the boom and interest in *iyashi* is correlated with Japan's "Lost Decade" (the period following the end of the bubble economy, 1990 to the early 2000s), and the rise of economic and social instability as Japanese society attempted to restructure in response to the crash and depression. The *iyashi* boom is generally seen by scholars to have been catalyzed by two major events in 1995: the Kobe Earthquake and the Tokyo sarin gas attacks. The Kobe Earthquake, a 6.9 tremor that hit the densely populated city of Kobe, led to more than 5000 deaths and caused an unprecedented level of destruction in Japan at that time. An earthquake of that magnitude damages people's sense of the stability in their lives, as even the ground beneath their feet was unstable. The second event, a series of terrorist attacks in which poisonous gas was released in the subways of Japan's capital, Tokyo, caused the kind of widespread fear that terrorism is designed to evince. This was exacerbated by the fact that many people, living busy, urban, isolated lives, had no place to turn to receive the emotional support that would ameliorate this sense of fear. The growing unease of economically unstable workers coincided with events that sharply undermined individuals' faith that everything would be okay.

The word *iyashi* was first coined by the Japanese anthropologist Noriyuki Ueda in his ethnography on a Sri Lankan village entitled "Suri Ranka no Akuma barai - ime-ji to *iyashi* no consumoroji- (Image, Healing and Cosmology in Sri Lanka)," published in 1990. The first major usage of the word in the media was by a newspaper editor referring to Ueda's work and his piece explored *iyashi's* dual meaning as both heart and body healing. The flexibility inherent in the loose definition of the word has meant that it is both difficult to classify as an idea and that it is easily applied to a variety of different situations, which has led to the idea being applied in many contexts in Japan. An *iyashi* experience is an experience that is a combination of excitement and relaxation. Japanese individuals seeking out *iyashi* are attempting to both disconnect from their daily stresses, and to connect to something outside themselves. This may mean being connected to more abstract feelings such as nature or salvation, or, for individuals feeling more directly isolated, it may be about connecting to other people or other creatures, like animals. Usage of the word *iyashi* surged in media discourse following the disasters of the mid-1990s, as the Japanese populace experienced a surge of interest in healing from the traumas of those events. The word went from 2 uses of the word in Japan's three major Japanese newspapers - the Mainichi Shinbun, the Yomiuri Shinbun and the Asahi Shinbun - in 1990, to dozens in 1995. By 1999, the word was named one of the top ten buzzwords of the year at the sixteenth *Ryūkō go taishō* (Buzzword awards) by the Jiyukokuminsha publishing house.

Today, *iyashi* is often used as something of a catch-phrase, a hip concept that will attract the eye of consumers. An ad campaign in 2015 designed to draw travelers to

Kamakura to see the hydrangeas blooming, a flower for which the area is known, showed a wave of multi-colored blooms and the slogan “Iyashi, in full bloom” (*Iyashi, mankai*), [Figure 8] using the idea of *iyashi* to market a day out. The current usage of the term *iyashi* is used to evoke positive feelings and mark any experience as one that will make one feel good. The sense of feeling good is closely aligned with a sense of stress reduction and restoring mental balance, but it is flexible enough to be applied to spiritual or religious activities or to the experience of relaxing in an animal café. With this definition, one can see how a spiritual retreat, a visit to the gardens of Kamakura or a trip to a maid café can all be considered *iyashi* experiences.

The boom period was characterized largely by Japanese people seeking out *iyashi*, or experiences that would allow them to feel *iyasarete iru* (healed), through an embrace of alternative medicines or therapies, or “New New Religions (*shinshiruhukyo* 新新宗教)” such as Naikan. During this period, *iyashi* goods, like scented oils or home foot spas, and *iyashi* experiences, like aromatherapy, or power spot tours (also known as *kijō*, 気場), which take visitors to powerful places to draw on the land’s positive energy, focused on offering healing through soothing emotional stress.

Over the course of the last two decades the term has shifted away from spiritual security and wellbeing and towards psychological balance and health (Matsui 2009, Roquet 2009). Animal cafés are a type of this kind of *iyashi* business. Where earlier *iyashi* businesses focused on emotional anxiety and physical tension, animal cafés focus on problems caused by social disconnection. These businesses focus on offering healing through relaxation away from the social relations at work that can be a source of stress, and as a chance to combat the loneliness of returning to an empty home by spending time surrounded by others.

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[1]U-Can Shingo Ryukogo Taisho. "16th Ryukogo Taisho (Buzzword Awards)". [singo.jiyu.co.jp](http://singo.jiyu.co.jp). <http://singo.jiyu.co.jp/nendo/1999.html> (retrieved Aug. 5 2016).

## Commodifying Intimacy

While the *iyashi* boom has driven the success of animal cafés, their specific structure is primarily shaped by earlier business types that commodified intimacy in Japan during the 1980s and 1990s. Anthropologists have done significant research on a variety of

these businesses and the way they encourage customers to purchase intimacy in a club or café setting, from hostess clubs in the 1980s to host clubs in the 1990s and maid cafés in the 2000s (Allison 1994; Galbraith 2013; Takeyama 2016). The business models in these spaces are based on traditional commodity exchange, as visitors are paying for the food and drink they consume, but the prices were obviously and heavily marked up. Visitors are willing to pay that cost because it gains them the attention and focus of the host, hostess, or maid.

In contrast, animal café visitors pay to enter the café, with the entrance cost frequently including a free drink or unlimited drinks at a modest fee, but do not have to pay in order to keep the attention of the animals. Once they have entered the space, they can lay claim to it, using it as if it were their home without having to continue making new purchases to retain the attention of the workers, as you do in a host or hostess club. Animal cafés are not cheap to visit, averaging about \$10 for an hour's stay, especially for young people without significant discretionary funds, but they are more inexpensive than other outings and activities (and much cheaper than a host or hostess club). In addition, the rate decreases the longer one stays, so the price can be very reasonable for a devoted visitor. This means that the visitors most in need of the positive feelings of relaxation and companionship provided by the animal café, who are also often the most financially unstable, are able to receive more from time in the space without additional cost.

Also, in contrast to other type of intimacy businesses, in an animal café the experience that attracts customers is built around interaction with animals, which creates an easy sense of familiarity and removes the sense of social anxiety that can come from interactions with people, who may be judgmental [\[Figure 7\]](#). Free from prescribed behaviors, these are spaces for customers to be selfish, to focus on their own needs and interests, and to be free from the responsibility to be attentive to the needs of others. Customers pay to enter, socialize as little or as much as they wish, and leave, recuperated and more able to face the demands of the world outside the café walls.

## **Socializing with Animals**

Animal cafés are, of course, also distinctive from other kinds of intimacy businesses because customers are coming not to spend time with service workers, but to be with animals. As mentioned, the most common café animals are ones like cats or rabbits that customers can pet or cuddle; visitors are not just interested in talking with their animal companion but in the positive affective feeling, what the Japanese refer to as *iyashi*, that comes from touch and connecting physically with another being. Visitors also talk about

the sense that they communicate with the animals and can share their feelings with them; this communication may be nonverbal on the side of the animals, but it is valuable enough that they are happy to pay for the opportunity to experience it.

Research has shown that interactions with animals lead to demonstrable stress reduction, but the popularity of animal cafés in Japan is driven by a variety of factors beyond just the physical benefits that come from getting to touch an animal. A major element is the fact that interaction and communication with an animal can offer a sense of sociality without the anxiety that interaction with humans can carry, creating an encounter that offers connection without tension. Visitors can focus only on what they want out of the social encounter and do not have to think about the needs and concerns of the other, as they would another Japanese person [\[Figure 9\]](#). Additionally, animal café customers largely were young children during Japan's pet boom, in the 1970s and 1980s, and so strongly associate animals like cats with their childhood homes and the pets they grew up with.

Different kinds of animal cafés, and the opportunity to interact with different species, each offer a particular type of experience. Cat cafés tend to focus more on quiet relaxation and comfort, with an emphasis on relaxing with domesticated animals. Many people living in Tokyo and other big cities live in very small studio apartments that do not allow pets, so spending time with a cat in a cat café gives them the opportunity to be with a pet they do not have space for at home and to connect nostalgically to the sense of social connection of their formative years. Customers activities in cat cafés, playing with cat toys, curling up next to the cats, or taking pictures of them dressed in funny hats, are close to how they might spend time with their own pet.

In contrast, other types of animal cafés create value by giving visitors the opportunity to see and touch "wild" animals who they would not otherwise encounter. Time spent in these businesses is more focused on appreciating the novel opportunity to gently touch or take pictures with a more unusual creature. Interacting with rabbits in a rabbit café gives customers the feeling that they are nurturing and caring for an animal they see as docile and innocent, along with the thrill of being with an animal they would not usually have the chance to touch. This is even more true for owl and other bird cafés, where customers can be close to non-domesticated species, and get a chance to feel like they are connecting to the "natural" world, a space that feels far away from their heavily urbanized daily life. By connecting with animals, customers can vicariously enjoy the freedom from societal constraints that non-humans represent.

The website of one Tokyo cat café refers to the cats as "staff," and while this is clearly meant as a joke, the animals in cafés do create value through their "labor" in the café. Animals are trained from birth for life in a café, learning to be non-aggressive,

comfortable with many people and other animals, and patient with human attention. Life for a café animal can be stressful if there is too much stimulation, as animals may be woken, petted, picked up or otherwise interfered with throughout the day. Cafés accommodate the animals' needs by providing spaces to which an animal can retreat or be moved to for a rest when they are being over-socialized, and cats and rabbits will then return from their rests energized to play with visitors once again. Additionally, human employees are quick to head off any problems, such as mishandling of an animal by a guest or any issues between animals. The animals are well trained enough that there are rarely problems. Some cafés sell snacks for cats or rabbits to facilitate interaction between animals and humans, and the human employees act as a bridge between the two, demonstrating what one animal likes or another's favorite toy.

This does not mean that customers demand that café animals always be friendly and willing to play or be touch. In fact, customers appreciate the fact that animals will express their feelings (even dislike of a person) freely; this freedom to act on one's impulses is part of the attraction of animals to café customers. Many customers happily spent much of their time in a café "being with" the animal, taking pictures or relaxing near animals, without needing to touch an animal that does not enjoy it. This also means that when customers have become regular enough visitors that they are recognized and greeted by a café cat, they know they have truly earned the friendship of the animal. When a cat deigns to curl up next to a regular customer it has become familiar with, the honesty of that expression of affection is more meaningful.

## **Conclusion**

Each individual animal café differs somewhat in atmosphere, what type of experience they are trying to provide and what type of customer they are trying to attract. Of course, cat cafés are going to attract people who care about cats while rabbit cafés appeal to rabbit lovers, but customers differ in whether or not they want to be soothed or energized, whether they want to be left by themselves or have opportunities to chat with other customers or employees; they differ in terms of what kind of *iyashi* experience they want to have. What each customer desires in terms of *iyashi* differs based on their particular stresses. However, what all animal cafés share is an intrinsic social component. This does not mean that all customers come to hang out and chat with friends or people they've just met, though many do, but that the experience of being in an animal café is about being around others. Those others may not be human, but they all offer a way for individuals to be connected to creatures, human and animal, outside of themselves, and to not feel as isolated as they might alone at home. The animal café serves a variety of functions, different for each customer who enters, but always about

inhabiting a world with others but separate from the day-to-day social stresses of the outside world. These businesses have become popular in Japan because of the need for such a haven from everyday life, and their spreading popularity globally is an indication that those stresses are in no way limited to Japan.

The idea of cat cafés has caught the imagination of many people beyond Japan and cat cafés have now opened in dozens of countries globally, from China to Austria to the United States [Figure 10], but no one knows how long they will continue to be popular in Japan. However, while the cat café boom is over, there are still a significant number of cat, and other animal, cafés in Japan, with new businesses opening every year. Tokyo's first cat cafés, which opened more than a decade ago, have started to introduce new kittens to replace retiring cat workers, and these kittens represent café owners' belief that their businesses will be around for years to come.

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## Suggested Reading

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