Animal Care in Japanese Tradition: A Short History, by W. Puck Brecher
By James Stone Lunde, Kiriyama Fellow, University of San Francisco


Puck Brecher’s Animal Care in Japanese Tradition: A Short History is a welcome addition to the history roster of the Association for Asian Studies’ burgeoning Asia Shorts collection. Counting just over a hundred pages in its body, this terse monograph covers a span of over a millennium with remarkable depth, providing a lively and detailed study of the major Japanese traditions of animal care while also incorporating a robust theoretical engagement with normative discourses surrounding the treatment of animals.

Brecher’s work is concerned with the contradictions that emerge between moral norms and pragmatic interests regarding animal care. In exploring these contradictions, the author
outlines the dominant discourses and pivotal moments of cultural and material transformation of the status of animals throughout Japanese history. Brecher notes that “Animals are variously cherished, abused, cuddled, and tortured in any society” (p. 83), and with this multipolarity in mind he traces the interactions between the Japanese treatment, consumption, and exploitation of animals and the many prescriptions regarding animal care found in animist spiritual traditions, Buddhist scriptures and precepts, Confucian philosophy, and Western discourses from “Dutch Studies” to the Meiji enlightenment and beyond.

In Chapter 1, Brecher addresses Orientalist and Nihonjinron “Japanese exceptionalist” discourses of animal care, indicating skepticism of a uniquely Japanese harmony with nature and love for animals that can be situated in aesthetic, Shintō, or Buddhist traditions. Brecher also dispenses with Western-centric moral evaluations of Japan that frame the Japanese as unique in their cruelty and lack of compassion for living things. For Brecher, both perspectives are unsatisfactory, inadequately considering Japanese taxonomies of living beings and of normative ethics—for instance, those found in the *uchi* 内 and *soto* 外 dichotomy (p. 3). Brecher also sees these grand cultural narratives as reductive in their failure to explain the complexity that he abundantly documents. In keeping with the wide-ranging scholarship and exciting documentary miscellany of this book, Brecher takes the opportunity to illuminate the origins of Japanese outcaste *eta hinin* 稽多非人 status (p. 13), samurai dog-keeping (p. 14), Hideyoshi’s views on the connection between the barbarism of slavery and the barbarism of meat-eating (p. 19) and Japan’s first cookbook (p. 19).

In Chapter 2, Brecher explores the central contradiction between Buddhist proscriptions against killing and meat-eating and the ubiquity of killing and meat-eating among Japanese Buddhists. Brecher describes the linguistic *legerdemain* that sanitized these activities, and explains how ritual repentance and absolution emerged as a type of religious service that supplied the demand for spiritual exoneration, for instance through recitations of the Buddhist *nenbutsu* 念仏 prayer (p. 22) and *dōbutsu kuyō* 動物供養, funeral ceremonies for game and catch (p. 24). Brecher also discusses the Shōgun Tsunayoshi’s “Laws of Compassion”, dog-loving policies that historian Ōishi Shinzaburō rather unfairly called “The worst laws in world feudal history.”

In Chapter 3 Brecher discusses the impact of Western (or “Dutch”) veterinary knowledge and epistemology on Japanese medicine, with close attention to anatomical precision, as well as the differing extents of practical experience raising livestock between Japan and the West. Brecher notes the absence of substantial anatomical knowledge in Japan (p. 37), the religious injunctions that inhibited the production of such knowledge, and the Western criticism of Japan’s apparent lack of empirical knowledge of the best practices for animal treatment and care. This chapter will be of interest to historians of *Rangaku* 蘭学 and of medical history, as it provides substantial parallels to the experiences of Japanese (human) physicians such

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as Sugita Genpaku in the realm of veterinary medicine, especially regarding the problems surrounding the spiritually polluting practices of vivisection and dissection.

Chapter 4 covers pet care in the Edo period, the competitive evaluation and commodification of animals, and the Buddhist and Confucian moral quandaries raised by pet-keeping. In his discussion of Edo bird dialects and songbird rearing, Brecher proposes that the systematized assessment of songbirds “erases any sense of the bird as a living creature, creating in its place an objectified human possession existing solely to entertain and gratify its master’s aesthetic sensibilities” (p. 51). Sadly, the exigencies of brevity have prevented Brecher from elaborating upon this idea, and we are left pondering why precisely competitive aesthetic assessment “erases” or “objectifies” the other dimensions of a creature or strips the owner of their sentimentality towards the animal; after all, while there may be heartless taskmasters among the trainers at Crufts, it is surely also a place of nearly unbridled love and devotion for dogs. Why should Edo songbird-keepers be any different? This question aside, scholars of objectification theory or of the capitalist subsumption of the environment will find many tantalizing ideas in this chapter.

In his discussion of the ethical considerations of animal care, Brecher exhibits his impressive talent for drawing adroit quotations from Japanese classics to illuminate his arguments, for instance finding the following passage in the *Tsurezuregusa* that illustrates compassion for animals rooted in Confucian moral cosmology: “As a rule, people who take pleasure in killing living creatures or making a creature fight another, are themselves akin to beasts of prey … if we carefully observe the countless varieties of birds and beasts … we shall discover that they love their children [and] long to be near their parents” (p. 54). Brecher also introduces readers to the debate over the spiritual exploitation of mouser cats, where owners pondered the ethics of delegating the Buddhist karmic burden of killing to their feline rat-hunters.

In Chapter 5, Brecher wades into the question of “westernization”, *bunmei* 文明 (“enlightenment”), and *hibunmei* 非文明 (“barbarism”), suggesting that post-Meiji contact with the West introduced new definitions of civilization that were contingent in part on private attitudes and public legislation towards animals, and on a new system of taxonomy: “Westernization added the classification of animals as food and nonfood … western civilization’s highly utilitarian treatment of animals” (p. 62). Brecher describes how this new category created a domain of “uncivilized” treatment of animals, such as the torture of monkeys for entertainment (p. 64) or the mismanagement of wild dogs (p. 63). Brecher also touches on the post-restoration imperial house and its nationalist prestige projects such as zoos (p. 70).

In Chapter 6, Brecher expands on these themes, focusing on “overwhelmingly critical” (p. 82) Western assessments of a Japan that remains in the “dark ages” (p. 83) vis-a-vis animal welfare, as “critical Westerners were also complaining about public displays of animal abuse” (p. 64). Here Brecher proposes a powerful thesis that Western discourse on animals is predicated less on a concern for animals than on perpetually retaining the moral high ground over Japan, constantly redefining normative standards of ethical treatment of animals to
include Western Europe and North America while excluding East Asia (p. 88). As South Korea ponders a dog meat ban and the PRC considers restrictions on the Yulin Dog Meat Festival, possibly due to pressure generated from the sensibilities of the Anglosphere and their Western allies, it is clear that this incisive observation deserves further attention.

Given Brecher’s detailed approach to scholarly inquiry, the diminutive size of this book has necessitated certain omissions. Readers will be saddened by the absence of a thorough treatment of the history of the sacred deer of Nara, whose divinity was stripped from them alongside that of the Japanese Emperor following WWII, the hot spring snow monkeys of Jigokudani, or the 20th-century extinction of the Japanese wolf. As this book covers the period from antiquity to 1950, topics such as Japanese scientific whaling and contemporary fishing disputes, the fact that pets exceed children in 21st century Japanese households, and other postwar issues of animal care also fall beyond the remit of the work.

Brecher’s writing is lucid and he manages to avoid unnecessarily technical musings without sacrificing documentary and theoretical depth. However, the brevity of the Asia Shorts format makes this book potentially challenging for readers without some elementary grounding in Japanese history and East Asian traditions—in particular Buddhist doctrine, Shintō practices, and Confucian philosophy. Nonetheless, even casual readers have much to gain from Brecher’s work, as nearly every page has a thought-provoking insight backed with thorough Japanese documentary citations and lavish quotations. Any scholar with even a passing interest in East Asian history, religion, art, society, and culture, or the cultural and environmental history of human-animal relations should add this elegant book to their reading list as a matter of top priority.

Author Bio

James Stone Lunde is a Kiriyama Fellow at the Center for Asia Pacific Studies and lecturer for History 130: East Asian Civilizations. He was born and raised in Andalusia, Spain and studied Japanese and Chinese philology at the University of Oxford, with a focus on Japanese literature and Chinese modern history. Dr. Stone Lunde pursued his graduate degree at the History Department of the University of California, Berkeley, where he has served as Visiting Lecturer for Japanese History. Dr. Stone Lunde has conducted extended research at Waseda University, Japan, with a special focus on China-Japan relations, Japanese colonialism, and the history of fascism and communism in Asia. He is currently preparing a book on the experiences of Japanese members of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, a paper on Fray Luis Sotelo and Hasekura Rokuemon Tsunenaga’s visit to Seville, and an article on Japanese war apologies following WWII. Dr. Stone Lunde continues to be passionate about Asian art and literature, from the classics of the Heian and Tang courts to modern manga and films.