

A multi-species ethnographic perspective on urban human-wildlife relationships—A comparative study of stray cats and wild raccoon dogs in Shanghai city

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Abstract: Referring to the modern cities, most people may think of "industry", "traffic", "buildings", and "population gathering". The city seems to have become the domain of human beings, but in fact, there are many kinds of animals living in the gaps between skyscrapers. From homeless stray animals to wildlife such as foxes and raccoon dogs that appear unexpectedly, how to deal with the human-animal relationship is an important part of urban management. In the face of different animals, citizens have adopted different attitudes, including the kindness towards stray animals and the detachment of wild animals. Such different attitudes reflect the divergent status of animals in the urban order. Understanding the reasons for different attitudes is both a central part of the inquiry into human-animal relationship, and can provide ideas for wildlife management. As an emerging field, multi-species ethnography has opened up a new perspective on human-animal relationship, and can better analyze the participation of animals in human society.

Keywords: Multi-species ethnography; Stray cat; Raccoon dog; Wildlife management; Human-animal relationship; Privileged animal

1. Introduction

In recent years, the number of pets kept in cities in China has risen sharply, which also induced the surge of stray cats and dogs. When animals change from domestic to "wild", how will citizens' attitudes towards them change? At the same time, news of "wild animals entering the city" has frequently emerged in recent years. What do citizens think of these "uninvited guests" who seemingly do not belong to the city? Comparatively speaking, will stray animals and wild animals be treated differently? This study will comprehensively present and deeply analyze a new type of human-animal relationship between subjects—rather than subject-object, and analyze how pets and wild animals serve as the extension and projection of human social relations, and constitute the subject of participation in human social life as well from the perspective of anthropological multi-species ethnography to break through anthropocentrism. Based on this, the relationship between humans and wild animals in cities in China can be further analyzed to provide ideas and suggestions for the management and protection of wild animals.

Multispecies ethnography, also known as cross-species ethnography, is a new research field emerging in 2010. Since the 1980s, with Philippe Descola, Viveiros de Castro, Latour and others as pioneers, a theoretical trend referred as the "ontological turn" has risen in anthropology, trying to break down the barriers between culture and nature, and re-understand the human world.^[1] Based on this theoretical origin, the publication of *The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography* in 2010 marked the official rise of this prospective field. In this field, some scholars have proposed the concept of multi-species ethnography, which expands the horizon to animals, plants and even microorganisms other than humans, focuses on the "contact" and "aggregation" between humans and other lives, starts from the symbiosis between humans and other species and thus observes human society through the lens of relationships or other species.^[2] At present, there are not many multi-species ethnographic studies on pets in Chinese literature, while the dominant perspective of existing research is worth learning that animals are not only regarded as external to human society or simple objects, but they can also participate in the human world as subjects in the "Actor Network", transferring the focus on the interaction between humans and other species.

Pets generally refer to animals that are endearing and have value such as appreciation, companionship,

and affection. Most of the existing research explains the human-pet relationship from the practical and emotional functions of pets.^[3] As a special animal that historically lives along with humans, pets have undergone a diversion from "objectification" to "personification" of their attributes, which is closely related to the advancement of pet emotion and ethics research.^[4] The keeping of pets can be traced back to thousands of years ago. Keith Thomas sorted out the history of early British horses, dogs, cats and other animals that jumped into "privileged animals", and pointed out that the emergence of pets was closely related to class;^[5] while Changlan Ji pointed out that the pet raising phenomenon during Song dynasty overlapped with the rise of civic culture that focuses on leisure and entertainment.^[6] The two researches are respectively based on the history of different countries, pointing out that pets are the product of citizen/urban life. With the advancement of urbanization, the phenomenon of keeping pets has become more and more prominent. Yang Faxiang and Li Anqi pointed out that reasons such as income increase, pressure rise, emotional breakdown, and "empty-nest" families have stimulated pet raising and consumption among urban youths.^[7] To sum up, pets could be regarded as the product of urbanization and modernity, and deeply involved in the life of modern city. At the same time, the new phenomena and new concepts emerging in contemporary urban pet raising also present a new type of human-pet relationship that is fairly different from the past.

The research on urban animal management in China is relatively insufficient. Existing research mainly focuses on pet management and pet (animal) rights under the framework of law and management. Researches on pet management usually regard pets as simple animals or property, which not only reflects the prominent problems faced by the current urban pet management, but also exposes the shortcomings of management rather than governance and the resulting institutional deficiency.^[8] In the current urban animal management process, stray animals represented by stray cats have gradually become management problems and have attracted widespread attention from the society. Stray cats are between wild animals and pets. They can both come from abandoned pets and be adopted as pets. They are a special wild animal in the city.

Compared with stray cats, other wild animals have a more alienated relationship with people. Based on the differences in people's attitudes towards different wild animals, the author will focus on the comparison and analysis of the relationships between people and stray cats and wild raccoon dogs, focusing on the different status of the two animals in the urban order and classification system.

2. Warmth: Citizen acceptance of stray cats

2.1. Stray cats in modern cities

Cats, as a sensitive and cute little animal, are endearing both at home and abroad. In the West, despite cats were regarded as tools for catching mice and objects of entertainment in the Middle Ages, they were widely considered as "companions" after the 17th century. In the early 1980s, 25% of households in the United States raised cats, and most cats lived in cities and got along with citizens day and night. In China, the division of domestication and raising of cats is between Sui and Tang Dynasties. Previously, cats were a kind of beast in the mountains and forests, which were very different from the domestic cat. In the pre-Qin period, the sentence "There are cats and tigers" in "the Book of Songs · Daya · Han Yi" put cats and tigers side by side; the lacquer plates with cat patterns unearthed from the Mawangdui Han Tomb also depicted cats as beasts with "sharp teeth and mouths". Down to the Tang and Song dynasties, tamed wild cats became domesticated "pet cat" and became frequent visitors in poetry, calligraphy and painting. In the Ming Dynasty, cats were even "appointed as officials and nobles". The ancient people's love for cats has continued towards today.

In contemporary society, with the advancement of industrialization and the deepening of urbanization, more and more citizens choose to keep pets, and cats, since they "have no burden in the world, no mistakes in things, and are beneficial for guardianship of livestock, and are attached to family members"^[9] with their innocent temperament and cute appearance, has become the first choice of pets by many people. However, with the popularization of cat raising, the number of stray cats in cities is gradually increasing. According to research, the appearance of stray cats is mainly related to the breeders, the animals themselves, practitioners in related industries, and feeders. According to a survey conducted by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in 2015, cats with the problem of disease, barking, and sanitation accounted for 46% of the total number of abandoned cats, housing conditions accounted for 18%, and family reasons (pregnancy, job transfer, etc.) accounted for 27%.^[10]

There is no doubt that stray cats will alter the urban environment and pose a certain threat to the

personal safety of citizens. Moreover, in recent years, animal cruelty incidents have attracted widespread attention. Therefore, many cities have successively issued regulations on the management of stray animals, and the government and social groups have also established various institutions. However, due to shortage of funding and insufficient manpower, spontaneous measures are often difficult to sustain.^[11] Compared with "official" and "groups", individual behaviors tend to be more "unrestricted". Then, in addition to these "official" behaviors, what attitude will ordinary citizens show when facing stray cats?

2.2. Citizens' acceptance and interaction with stray cats

According to the field survey conducted by Shao Shuai and his team in 11 communities in Hefei in 2019, every community has stray cats, and residents' spontaneous feeding behavior appears in 53% of the communities. The survey also finds out that private feeding is the most common behavior in all spontaneous rescues. The research team conducted interviews with residents who had feeding behaviors and found that most of the feeders were retired aunts and young people who loved cats. The feeders admitted that their initial feeding behavior was only out of temporary affection, but as the number of feedings increased, an "emotional bond and responsibility" was formed between themselves and the stray cats. Feeding behavior is further encouraged.

On the other hand, some residents said that random feeding of stray cats would lead to cats gathering, which will further affect the daily life of residents; but at the same time, residents can also understand the feeding behavior of cat lovers and can tolerate these negative effects to a certain extent. In addition, some residents are willing to contribute to the rescue of stray cats, hoping that the government and social organizations can properly solve the problem of stray cats.^[12]

At the same time, starting from my own life experience, I observed that most people are kind to stray cats, and interactive behaviors such as feeding, petting, and taking pictures are very common. The author believes that citizens' acceptance, tolerance and even affection for stray cats is not due to ignorance of the various hazards of stray cats, but out of a kind of "empathy" for domestic cats (pet cats) - identifying stray cats with the domestic ones and treating them with the same attitudes, and giving stray cats the same "status" as domestic cats emotionally.

According to the analysis of Keith Thomas, "certain favored animals maintain a close relationship with human society, and even become closer. ... This situation reflects the gradual rectification of this animal's name."^[5] Thomas took dogs in Western society as an example to discuss that as people, especially the royal family and nobles, grew more interested in raising dogs, the image of "dogs" gradually changed from despicable and shameless to loyal and brave, and this process is closely related to the status of the owner.^[5] The cats underwent the same status shift from unclean and impure to understanding and gracious. In human classification system, "offending order" is regarded as "dirty" and needs to be "excluded from our normal classification system"^[13], and "clean" as opposed to dirty means "orderly", which is normal to be accepted. As mentioned above, pet cats are "clean", "it is precisely because of the cleanliness and elegance of this animal that some people 'dote on cats'".^[5]

At the same time, the expansion of the number of pet cats has further promoted the change of people's concept of "cats". The more people who keep cats, the denser the cat-loving atmosphere in the society, and the "cats" will participate more deeply in the social order built by humans. The identity difference between domestic cats and stray cats will gradually disappear. They would be considered equally as "cats". The "privilege" of domestic cats has been given to stray cats, and stray cats have also become objects that can be fed and caressed. Thus, it is understandable for citizens to show warmth towards stray cats.

3. Detachment: Citizens' attitudes towards raccoon dogs

3.1. Raccoon dog and modern society

The raccoon dog is an ancient canine animal. Unlike cats, which are pets and can be domesticated, the raccoon dogs are wild and ambiguous from human society. In "the Analects of Confucius", there is a saying that "speaking faithfully and acting with sincerity and respect, even for a barbaric country" ("Mo" and "raccoon dog" are the same). As "barbaric raccoon dog" refers to the place of barbarians and minorities, this reflects the attitude of the ancients towards raccoon dogs. "We" are the majority and live in the central plains of China, and the "others" are barbarians and alienated tribes. Raccoon dogs are excluded from the "civilized" Chinese society because of their wildness and difficulty to be tamed.

During the Han and Wei dynasties, "the people in the central plains called the Jiangdong people are all raccoon dogs", and "raccoon dogs" are still a symbol of "not my race". In addition, the derogatory idiom "be tarred with the same brush", which means birds of a feather, seems to imply the negative image of raccoon dogs. If we consider that it was the traditional and simple dichotomy of "Huaxia-barbarians" and "human-nature" in ancient society that caused people to detest raccoon dogs, then in the modern society that pursues "harmonious coexistence between man and nature", does the image of raccoon dogs actually changed?

When referring to modern Shanghai, most people may associate it with the bustling scenes of "high-rise buildings" and "busy traffic". Indeed, the prosperity of the economy, the convenience of transportation, and the concentration of the population together make this city a highly modernized metropolis as a "concrete forest". From ancient times to the present, the wildness contained in the image of raccoon dogs has never dissipated, and it still retains its "primitiveness" and "nature". Although it is a local species in Shanghai and was once widely distributed, it seems to be out of tune with Shanghai. Around 2000, raccoon dogs "disappeared" in Shanghai; but in recent years, "they (referring to raccoon dogs) seem to have discovered some kind of 'trick' to adapt to the city, starting from a small area in Minhang District in southwest Shanghai, and gradually appearing in Songjiang, Pudong, Yangpu, Qingpu, Fengxian and other districts."^[14]

In 2017, the "Jiefang Daily" reported: "The surveillance cameras in the community have also photographed groups of raccoon dogs queuing up to enter the community at night, eating fish in the river, and queuing out of the community at dawn." In 2022, the researcher of Shanghai "raccoon dog census" project said: "22 of the 50 surveyed communities have discovered raccoon dogs, with an average of 10.82 raccoon dogs per community, and an average density of 1.08 per hectare." Combining questionnaires and field surveys, the researchers found that raccoon dogs were distributed in at least 260 communities or green spaces in Shanghai, and more than 50 raccoons, with a density of 5.8 per hectare, were detected in the most extreme case. If the number of Shanghai raccoon dogs is calculated based on the average density of 1.08 per hectare, it will be around 3000-5000 in total.

"Wild animals entering cities" is not a new topic, and reports of conflicts between wild animals and local residents in other countries and other cities in China are not uncommon. Although raccoon dogs used to be "localites" in Shanghai, they "disappeared" for a long time after all. Therefore, Shanghai residents' views of raccoon dogs that have "come back" recently are very important, and this also relates to whether they can live in harmony with raccoon dogs.

3.2. Human conflict and implicit detachment

In 2021, the incident of "raccoon dog biting people" in Shanghai pushed the obscure raccoon dog to the public. Under the media's "fanning the flames", entries such as "raccoon dog flooding" and "raccoon dog attacking people" became the focus of public attention. "A large number of complaints flooded into the mayor's hotline, and some residents organized a discussion in the WeChat group to offer a reward for catching raccoon dogs, and there were even online videos of people catching raccoon dogs with sticks and woven bags in the street."^[14] The conflict between people and raccoon dogs rapidly intensified.

However, according to the research team's personal experience, the raccoon dogs in Shanghai communities are not aggressive towards people, and even "would actively avoid people when they see them." They described the raccoon dogs as "careful and timid, vigilant about the surroundings; meanwhile, curious and brave to explore new environments", and only young raccoon dogs "would run around recklessly, and a small raccoon even bumped on my ankle when crossing the corridor". Thus, the researchers speculate that the so-called "raccoon dog biting" may have been "caused by a similar encounter".^[14]

In addition to the obvious human-raccoon dog conflicts, citizens' attitudes towards raccoon dogs are complex and multi-faceted: on one hand, citizens have a strong curiosity about raccoon dogs, hoping to have close contact with them, and some residents would feed them in the communities, which even may make a "cat food mountain". Obviously, this kind of spontaneous feeding is not conducive to the natural growth of wild raccoon dogs, and would cause raccoon dogs to "deviatively behave in the human settlement, such as eating cat food, picking up rubbish, chasing people for food, etc.", which may lead them to lose its wildness and vigilance against people.

On the other hand, more than 300 questionnaires I collected showed that most people's attitudes towards raccoon dogs are vague or even indistinctly repulsive. Citizens generally agree that "raccoon dogs can survive in cities", but meanwhile they are worried about the possible negative impacts of

raccoon dogs, such as traffic accidents, the relationship between raccoon dogs and pets, environmental pollution, and diseases. Wild animals such as wild animals would bring new problems to urban management.

Referring to rejection of raccoon dogs, this kind of thinking may be representative to a certain extent- "why should they (referring to raccoon dogs) be studied, raccoon dogs may take away the stray kittens I feed. They are too annoying". This was the answer given by an auntie who disliked raccoon dogs. Both raccoon dogs and stray cats survive in the "gaps" of the city, but citizens' attitudes towards them are quite different: stray cats are the darling of the community, and residents are willing to endure the negative impacts they bring; however. Raccoon dogs are alienated "neighbors", and citizens are more concerned about the resettlement of raccoon dogs and response of the government and institutions.

4. Warmth and Detachment: An Analysis of the Causes of Citizens' Different Attitudes

Citizens' affection for stray cats has been detailed above - in short, with the expansion of domestic cat raising, the image of domestic cats has turned positive, which has also led to changes in the image of stray cats. Domestic cats and stray cats are both "cats", so stray cats are also touchable and interactive, and have the same "quality" as domestic cats. But the raccoon dogs are obviously different. The raccoon dogs have appeared as "wild animals" from ancient times to the present in human society, and has not established a close relationship with humans. People's understanding of the raccoon dog is quite limited and they treat them as unfamiliar and ambiguous, while the consequences of interacting with it is unknown.

If the city is regarded as an order established by human society, then the raising of domestic cats goes hand in hand with the development of this order. Therefore, "cat" is a factor within the order and can be identified. However, the raccoon dogs are always outside the order, so even the localities of the city cannot escape the fate of being excluded by the city: "Occasionally, some strange populations or individuals will cross the boundary. At this time, human beings will avoid this or that plant or animal to respond."^[13]

"In the process of imposing any order, whether in the mind or in the external world, people's attitudes toward discarded bits and pieces pass through two stages. First, they are perceived as out of place and threat to the order, so that they are regarded as a nuisance and must be swept away."^[13] On the level of "order", raccoon dogs are "outsiders" in human society, and they themselves are a challenge to the modern cities. In addition, regarding the diseases and other environmental problems that come with the raccoon dogs, citizens find that some negative changes have taken place in their original life, so they would naturally feel repulsive and disgusted with the source of the changes.

Besides, the possible tension between raccoon dogs and stray cats is also an important factor. Stray cats have been accepted by the city and become "us" in the eyes of citizens, while raccoon dogs have always been "the other". When there is a conflict between stray cats and raccoon dogs, citizens may involuntarily choose to protect stray cats and expel raccoon dogs.

To sum up, the difference in people's attitudes towards raccoon dogs and stray cats is mainly due to the protection of the "order" of the city. The emergence of raccoon dogs in the city are considered to be "out of bounds" and the problems they bring are both disruptive to the order and threatening to humans themselves. Thus, citizens would show more alienation and rejection of raccoon dogs instead of the warmth shown to the stray cats.

5. Conclusions

The appearance of raccoon dogs in cities not only affects the urban environment, but also means the restoration of the urban ecological environment. In fact, the vast majority of raccoon dogs are not aggressive to people. The research team in Shanghai also used various apparatuses and analysis methods to predict the possible spread area of raccoon dogs, and tracked the activity path of raccoon dogs. As long as they are treated properly, raccoon dogs would probably not have much impact on the daily life of citizens.

Like stray cats and dogs that can be seen everywhere, raccoon dogs are now also a member of the city, and citizens only need to treat them normally. Popular science articles in newspapers and magazines can enhance the public's understanding of raccoon dogs, and may promote the tolerance of raccoon dogs among citizens. The relationship between humans and raccoons is also an important part of "harmonious coexistence between man and nature". In addition, although the emergence of raccoon dogs challenges

the existing wildlife management mode, hopefully one day people will have a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the raccoon dogs in the city with the cooperation of the government, researchers, and citizen volunteers.

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