

Why is cat rescue an anti-social, anti-cultural, and anti-*ie* act in Japan?

Department of International and Cultural Studies
Kimiko Akita

Introduction

Cat rescue is a common community activity in the U.S. There are many volunteer cat rescue organizations in each community for anyone to join easily. Volunteers from all walks of life, initially strangers to one another, whether allergic to cats or not, help achieve their common goal: TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return). Rescuers aim to provide safety, shelter, and medical treatment and care for feral cats and to protect them from hunger, disease, and undesired procreation. They prevent cats' misery. Generally, the more disadvantaged victims in the feral environment are females. The feminine nature of nurturing and caring is imperative in this activity.

In my 20 years of residency in the U.S., I rescued cats for about 10 years in Florida. Unlike the dumpster areas in the residential neighborhoods and college communities in the Midwestern states where I had lived for the first 10 years, I was stunned to witness so many stray and feral cats roaming around the University of Central Florida in Orlando when I moved to Florida. I joined the CARE Feline TNR cat rescue group in 2005 (Akita, 2010) and ended up rescuing more than 130 cats by 2014. Moving back to Japan from the U.S. at the end of March 2014, little did I know that the feral cat situation in Japan was far worse than in the U.S. The type of cat rescue organizations I was familiar with was non-existent in Nagakute City, where I settled. It was ironic because Nagakute had been chosen as the second-best city to live in Japan consecutively in recent years. Despite the helpless and desperate situation, I started to rescue cats on my own. Since 2014, I have rescued more than 30 cats by myself and found homes for 13 of them. My TNR efforts have been an independent activity. I have spent more than \$6,000 for TNR out of my own pocket since the city's subsidy for spaying/neutering is minimal (only 10 % of the spay/neuter cost for every surgery about \$200).

Cat rescue is a lonely activity requiring stealth. In a country stubbornly adhering to tradition, promoting new ideas can be seen as subversive of the reigning order of things, an anti-cultural and anti-social act. Cat rescuers, who attempt novelty and change, are perceived as a radical anomaly, menaces to a society. 99% of meager rescuers whom I have met in Japan since 2014 are women. Unlike people who simply do not care about cats or who ignore them and the feral problem, the female cat rescuers I know speak their mind openly and bravely demand more assistance from local government for cat rescue. Women's public assertions against the government and social structure would be considered anti-social and anti-cultural acts in Japan. Worse, such dissidence is seen as unfeminine, unwomanly—unlike the ideal mother/wife—a potential threat to the Japanese family patriarchal system, *ie*.

This article describes my cat rescue journey in Nagakute City, Japan, for the past three and a half years, between April 2014 and November 2017. Applying Goffman's (1959) idea of impression management and Jeremy Bentham's 1787

“Panopticon” design (see Foucault, 1977), I will analyze the data and discuss Japanese social masking and xenophobia toward strangers and novelty. I will demonstrate that Japanese use their masked behavior of *uchi* (private, personal) and *soto* (superficial, public) skillfully to fend off strangers and novelty, which ultimately helps perpetuate the *ie* system in terms of social interactions and social structure.

Social interactions and masking under *ie*

In Japan, the idea of *ie* (pronounced “*ee-eh*”; it means *family* or *household*), Japanese patriarchal system affects social interactions, speech style, gender relationship, family relationship, and social structure. As a system, in terms of Goffman’s (1959) idea, men play a frontstage role, while women play a backstage supportive role. The concept of *ie* affects men and women to live in patriarchy. Men and women become agents of *ie* and perpetuate *ie*. Women are expected to act domestic, compliant, and docile, but their performance (behavior and speech style) in the backstage can greatly affect men’s reputation and status in frontstage.

Women identify themselves by the paternal (father’s, husband’s or son’s) *ie* (Gordon, 2011, p. 371). Under the *ie* system, a woman’s social identity is not self-identity, but the collective family-unit identity since she represents for her husband’s family. If a mother/wife is stigmatized, not only she and her maiden family, but also her husband and his side of the family, along with their children, will thus become socially stigmatized. They must protect the backstage and are cautious about any intruders coming into their backstage space.

The concept of *ie*, rooted in Confucianism, requires that women subjugate themselves to fathers, husbands, and sons and persevere for the sake of their family. Women are expected to administer household affairs and resolve all emotional or relational issues for family. Under the *ie* system, a wife is expected to treat her husband’s and his immediate family members’ healthcare as more important than that of her own, or of her parents’, or of her maiden family’s. Women in particular become *ie* victims and wear the rigid *ie* (family) mask, making every effort not to ruin or not to discredit family reputation (see Akita, 2016).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977), discussed how Bentham’s design of the *panopticon* for prisons works in modern society and how discipline developed a new economy and politics for individuals. I argue that Japanese women live as prisoners constantly under what Foucault called an “unequal gaze” in the panopticon of *ie*. Under *ie*, the prisoners are unaware that they are being watched by guards; but the guards are, in reality, the prisoners themselves. To prescribe and continually enforce values required to maintain *ie*, each prisoner becomes a guard, critically monitoring herself or himself, as well as one another, for any sign of anti-*ie* behavior (see Akita, 2005). Both men and women are prisoners/guards in *ie*’s dungeon, but women are the more able corrective guards and prisoners. A woman prisoner from the highest *ie* class must be the model prisoner and watch her own behavior especially carefully. Other common prisoners, such as lower *ie* class prisoners, expect so much of this high *ie* woman that they would scrutinize her constantly and more critically. That same woman from a lower *ie* class is under less scrutiny. The guards (spectators) do not care as much about what she does. Prisoners are disciplined and punished through their own, as well as others’, corrective “unequal gaze.”

Cat rescuers most likely encounter women, as it is Japanese custom for a wife or a mother to answer the door upon a stranger's visit. Homeowners would be asked whether they mind having cat traps set on their property. What those homeowners worry about the most is the eyes of their neighbors. Women who manage the household are worried whether having a cat trap on their property would stigmatize their family or discredit the family reputation. They may wonder whether the trap could signify animal cruelty and brutality. Some neighbors may think the family tries to eradicate cats in the neighborhood. Some residents in the neighborhood may think that the bait food set in the trap would allure feral cats and vermin to defecate and urinate, thus polluting the community. Compared to apartment rental residents, homeowners of generations are considered the higher *ie* class in Japan, and they receive a more intense gaze from neighbors and would likely become prisoners of the *ie* dungeon. They would look at themselves with "unequal gaze" and be keenly cautious about involving themselves in cat rescue.

***Uchi* and *soto* masking upon cat rescue**

Lebra (1976) argues that the Japanese distinguish one situation from another according to the dichotomy of *uchi* and *soto*, saying, "*Uchi* means 'in, inside, internal, private,' whereas *soto* means its opposite, 'out, outside, external, public.'" (p. 112). Lebra (1976) conceived that the Japanese can have intimate interaction only when their social status is removed and they can have social equality. One achieves intimate interaction in private (*uchi*) space, being away from work, by going out to eat and drink in a private room in a restaurant or a hotel, or bathing in bathhouses and hot springs (Lebra, 1976). The *uchi* (inside, private, close, informal) space corresponds with a "backstage" in terms of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical concept, "as a place relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. ... Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character" (Goffman, 1959, p. 112). The "backstage" space should be a sanctuary, different from the public front domains of their lives, allowing people an escape from their busy and tense front stage lives. It allows people to reveal privates, matters including talk about sex (e.g., Ashkenzai & Rotenberg, 1999; Clark, 1994; Lebra, 1976; Smith & Wiswell, 1982).

When Japanese are in *soto* (outside), they cultivate *tatemaie*, social surface, and do not talk openly about their private matters (Hendry, 1990; Kondo, 1990; Lebra, 1976). When Japanese are in *uchi* (private space), they talk privately, with more authentic feelings, or *honne* (Hendry, 1990; Kondo, 1990; Lebra, 1976). Hendry (1990, 1993) argued that the Japanese conceal their inner selves by many layers of cultural "wrappings" (linguistic, bodily, spatial, and ritual) when they are in *soto*. Hendry (1990) conceived that the Japanese use of polite and respectful verbal expressions, *keigo*, and polite non-verbal expressions during their interactions in *soto* are forms of cultural wrappings. Japanese use *keigo* "to express respect for those with whom they interact, but at the same time protect themselves from the harshness of direct exchanges by wrapping their *honne*, their individual opinions and views, in an appropriate layer of politeness" (Hendry, 1990, p. 25). Use of *keigo* also makes the situation formal. Hendry (1990) posited that naked speech, by shedding *keigo*, enables Japanese to talk openly and equally.

Hendry's premise (Japanese behaving formally/concealing in public space and informally/revealing in private space) seems to have influenced McVeigh (1997) to

study Japanese women's cultural wrappings. McVeigh (1997) assumes that the Japanese inner self is hidden in cultural wrappings (material culture). In accordance with Hendry's (1993) premise and Ide's (1997) insight that "appropriate language has a similar function to appropriate attire in Japan" (p.48), McVeigh (1997) postulated that Japanese women theatricalize (ritualize) their bodily management and behavior (e.g., dress, appearance, speech mien, and deportment) when they are in public, but not so when they are in private space.

Cat rescue provides an ambivalent moment. When a rescuer rings a doorbell of a homeowner for cooperation, the interaction takes place at the homeowner's familiar home, *uchi* (backstage) space. The conversation topic is extremely private and personal, as it concerns the family members' handling of feral cats, their neighbors' whereabouts and rituals, and their understanding of TNR. However, the homeowner is alarmed and guarded with the total stranger's visit. She would use *keigo* "frontstage" speech style to fend off the anomaly and the novelty. If her *ie* (family) is considered higher class in the community (meaning she lives in a bigger house, her husband has high social status, her family has lived in the area for many generations) or if her *ie* has more secrets to hide, she would use the most refined *keigo* politely to fend off the strange visitor. She will show only *tatema*, not *honne*.

Cat rescue journey

When I moved back to Japan in April 2014 with three cats from the U.S. after 20 years of residency, I marveled at the big changes and developments that had transpired during my absence. One evening, while driving a rental car, I saw a fluffy white thing moving along a busy highway. It was a kitten! Immediately, pulling over the car the roadside, I got out of the car and tried to catch him. Though I had only a loaf of bread with me, the hungry and smart kitten responded to my meowing and came into my arms. One of his eyes was missing, which shocked me. I took him to a vet who could not save his injured eye, but the kitten survived. The kitten beat all odds. A month later, a wonderful angel colleague of mine adopted this kitten just the day before he was scheduled to be euthanized because no one else had wanted him. That was the beginning of my lonely, stealthy cat rescue journey in Japan.

I was too busy getting re-acclimated to rescue any more cats until December 2016. One warm evening that month, when I was driving back from grocery shopping, I saw two super-friendly kittens playing with a young couple outside a dangerous parking lot. I spoke to the couple, who said the kittens were feral, and the couple had no intention to adopt them. In the next few weeks, I was able to rescue two of them and found new homes for them. By January 2017, I noticed that there were many feral cats and kittens in my neighborhood. I learned that most of those cats had migrated from the bottom of the hill where an elderly man, Grandpa Teru, lived. He was known for feeding feral cats without spaying or neutering them. I bought traps and started to do TNR on my own. In March 2017, I accidentally frightened one of the cats I rescued, and she bit me. Because the accident happened on a weekend, I was unable to receive the right emergency medical care. When I went to see a surgeon Monday evening, my finger had become infected and was swollen with horrible pain. The surgeon immediately treated my finger by inserting a catheter to drain the toxins. For the next week, I had to keep the

catheter in my finger and visit a doctor daily to treat the infection. My finger looked like barbecued meat. I called it a Mickey Mouse finger with the bandage on.

By May 2017, I had already spent more than \$3,000 for TNR and was overwhelmed by the expense. On my second attempt, I was able to win a \$1,000 grant money from Nagakute City to subsidize my TNR activity. During my cat rescue journey, I have encountered a few cooperative cat rescuers. As of November 2017, I have rescued 31 cats, spayed/neutered 21, and found homes for 13. Aside from the grant, I have spent more than \$5,000 out of my own pocket to rescue cats. Hereafter, I will discuss my journey by applying the idea of *ie* masking and *uchi-soto* masking. All names appearing in this article are pseudo.

Grandma Kawai & confirmation of anti-*ie*

A culturally embraced and socially respected ideal image for an adult woman in Japan is as a mother or a wife. A childless, unmarried woman who has time and can afford to pay for cat rescue alone is an anti-*ie* anomaly. In May 2017, after I won the cat rescue grant, I zeroed in the neighborhood where Grandpa Teru, the cat mill owner (a culprit of cat proliferation), lived. It was an upscale old neighborhood with huge houses in which generations co-existed. First, I rang the doorbell of Grandma Kawai, an old woman whose house was across from Grandpa Teru. After an initial suspicion was cleared, she was delighted to meet me and allowed me to set my cat traps in her vegetable garden, which had suffered from so many feral cats urinating and pooping every day. Grandma Kawai said, “Because you are unmarried and childless, you have plenty of time and money for yourself to do cat rescue. We (mothers and wives in general) have so much responsibilities and would not have that luxury (to fool around like you).” Another moment that confirmed my being an anti-*ie* anomaly occurred when I was waiting to be treated in a hospital for my cat bite. A stranger sitting next to me said, “Oh, you must be really wealthy and have lots of extra time, so that you are able to do such a thing like a cat rescue (fool around). Otherwise, commoners (married women with children) would not be able to do such a thing.” These two moments stunned me. Regardless of my marital or parental status, I would have spent time and money rescuing cats, but in Japan only an unmarried and childless anti-*ie* woman was seen as qualified to be a cat rescuer. And, of course, an anti-*ie* woman is less respected in Japan than an *ie* woman.

Grandma Naito & expressing *tatemae*

Grandma Kawai agreed to introduce me to Grandma Naito, who lived right behind Grandpa Teru’s house. Grandma Naito was overjoyed to meet me and to learn of my cat rescue mission because she and her grandson were allergic to cats and had been troubled by Grandpa Teru’s cats. Grandma Naito allowed me from that evening to set a cat trap in front of her entrance gate from midnight until 5 a.m. Within an hour of leaving Grandma Naito’s house, I received a call from her. She said, “I can no longer help you. I spoke with my son. He says that my family would cause too much trouble to our neighbors if the cat trap sits in front of our gate in the night (meaning that his family would look suspicious and ridiculous in the eyes of the neighbors). Because my son disagrees, I am sorry that I cannot help you at all.” It was a very quiet neighborhood, where no one would be outside in the middle of the night. I was planning to remove the trap before 5 a.m., but Grandpa Naito did not allow me to do it. She sounded controlled by her son. I recalled what

Grandma Kawai and other neighbors had said about the Naito family. Grandma Naito's grandson had a mental disorder and often screamed loudly enough for neighbors to hear. Grandma Naito feels bad about that and often visits neighbors to apologize. Mr. Naito likely was thinking that his son's screaming was already a big blemish to his family. He probably did not want to enlarge the stigma on his family. On the other hand, Grandma Naito expressed her *tatema*e throughout her interaction with me. She never shared her *honne*, which was that it was her son's opinion, not hers.

Grandma Goshima

Grandma Goshima, a widow in her 70s, lives with 16 cats on a huge property one block away from a busy intersection featuring a McDonald's and a popular One Hundred Yen (One Dollar) shop. Grandma Goshima has her house, her cathouse, her daughter's house, and her vegetable garden on her property. One cat lives inside her house, and the other 15 live in an adjacent, air-conditioned cathouse. Though she was a cat-lover herself and obviously wealthy, she was very reluctant to help my cat rescue work initially. She was extremely worried about her neighbors' gaze. She said: "Suppose I set up your trap on my property, the bait food in the trap will attract many feral cats. My neighbors will notice that and they will complain that I am polluting this neighborhood. Those feral cats will defecate and urinate on my property. It will cause too much trouble to my neighbors." Grandma Goshima, speaking in highly polished *keigo*, initially declined to help but eventually agreed after she learned that I was a responsible person and that my TNR work was actually helping the situation in her neighborhood. Another thing was that Grandma Goshima's daughter was a college professor, as am I. Grandma Goshima seemed to respect this occupation. It appeared that she was happy to work with someone who shared her daughter's prestigious occupation. Grandma Goshima's refined speech style with *keigo* may be her attempt to express her assumed high *ie*, for her daughter being a college professor. One day, when I brought two newly trapped kittens to her house for a temporary stay, I saw a picture of her late husband, who died of lung cancer a few years ago. Grandma Goshima said to me: "This is my husband's picture. He never smoked, but died of lung cancer. He was a high school teacher. You know the famous cancer specialized hospital in Nagoya? He went through all kinds of treatment since he was in his Fifties. I was frantically busy, worn out from taking care of him for those 10 years. Because he passed away, I can get myself involved with cat rescue. Had he been alive, I would not have been able to do this." Grandma Goshima's remark confirmed that an anti-*ie* woman gets uniquely qualified to become a cat rescuer since she is released from her *ie* duties and responsibilities. She did not mean that an anti-*ie* person was any lazier or should receive any less respect than a wife and a mother.

Conclusion

During my journey, the vast majority of people who have agreed to help me have been women. Surprisingly, the women who were devoted cat rescuers were either single or widowed. Passionate cat rescuers are usually assertive. They do not mind calling the Nagakute City office's environment division often complaining about how little their TNR subsidy is. They are willing to speak to strangers trying to find a good home for tamed cats they have rescued. Female cat rescuers are

required to have these masculine, anti-cultural, and anti-social qualities, to protect cats and to prevent or end their misery. On the other hand, I met a few men who cooperated in my cat rescue activity. They were different from stereotypical *ie* men; in other words, they were anti-*ie* men. They were rather feminine and pretty comfortable obeying women's instructions and orders. Anti-cultural, anti-social, and anti-*ie* qualities seem to uniquely qualify men and women to be cat rescuers.

My encounters and interactions with three Grandmas—Kawai, Naito, and Goshima—confirmed that in their eyes I appeared to defy culture and social norms. My anti-*ie* status qualified me to be a cat-rescuer in their eyes. Each of them lives in a big house on a large property. They would be considered high *ie* women. They did not reject me; my social status as a college professor helped them to trust me and to treat me with respect. Interestingly, the three grandmothers are all highly conscious of their neighbors' gaze. They are prisoners of the *ie* dungeon. Grandma Naito was a prisoner as well as a very strict prison guard monitoring her own behavior with an unequal gaze. Her house and property were hers, not her son's, but she obeyed her son. She was loyal to the *ie* rules, meaning that she subjugated herself to her son, perpetuating the *ie*. Nowadays, Japan is considered a modern society, maintaining relatively equal gender relationships. However, the concept of *ie* is hidden and tacitly and persistently practiced all the time through social interactions among Japanese every moment, turning them into *ie* agents, prisoners, and guards, perpetuating the *ie* system.

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Dr. Kimiko Akita is an Associate Professor in the Department of International and Cultural Studies at Aichi Prefectural University in Aichi, Japan. Between 2005-2014, she was an associate professor in the School of Communication at the University of Central Florida. Her research articles on gender and cross-cultural issues have appeared in books and journals including *Communicating Women's Health: Social and Cultural Norms that Influence Health Decisions*, *Challenging Images of Women in the Media*, *Queer Media Images*, *Women and Language*, and the *Japan Studies Review*.