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11 Feline Saviours: Nekonomics, Stray Agency and the Kawaiification of Heritage Tourism in Japan

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Abstract

This chapter explores the commodification of domestic cats as living mascots at two Japanese heritage tourist attractions: Kishi Station and Bitchū _Matsuyama Castle. In both cases, the adoption of a formerly stray cat created a significant boost in tourist numbers at a time of financial hardship, which is interpreted as an example of 'nekonomics' (the economic effect of cats). The cats' presence led to a discursive and material reframing of the heritage sites as kawaii (cute) tourist attractions. A posthumanist conceptual lens is used to analyse the cats' disruptive stray agency and the ethics of keeping non-human animals as living mascots in heritage tourism.

Introduction

Japan has a longstanding love of the domestic cat (*Felis catus*). As symbols of good fortune and companions in many homes, cats are extensively represented in artisanal crafts, shrines and popular culture, thus constituting part of Japan's cultural heritage. The economic contribution of this national obsession is captured in the term 'nekonomics' (Miyamoto, 2016). Nekonomics is a Japanese play on words – '*neko*' being the Japanese word for cats and '-nomics' coming from former prime minister Abe's economic policies that were referred to as 'Abenomics'. Nekonomics is increasingly playing a role in tourism, not only through the use of cat imagery at attractions but also through the commodification of live cats, who are often scripted into the role of 'workers'. Little is known about the welfare conditions or experience of these cats, making it challenging to evaluate whether their assimilation into the tourism system constitutes exploitation or a form of multispecies symbiosis.

In this chapter, we analyse nekonomics in heritage tourism through two case studies: Tama the stationmaster of Kishi Station and Sanjūrō _the lord of Bitchū _Matsuyama Castle. In both cases, the presence of a cat on the premises at a time of financial hardship resulted in a significant boost to visitor numbers. After being taken in by staff, Tama and Sanjūrō _were given anthropomorphic outfits to wear and honorary titles. Their popularity has led to the production of cat-themed merchandise and, in Tama's case, Kishi Station was even rebuilt in the shape of a cat's head in 2010. These tourism settings can be conceptualized as sites of emergent, negotiated human–feline relations in which cats actively, if unwittingly, co-create heritage. In the case of Bitchū _Matsuyama Castle, this conventional heritage tourist attraction has been modified, in both a narrative and physical sense, by the addition of its cat lord. Kishi Station is more complex; here, we argue that the appointment of Tama and subsequent rebuild of the train station in her image can be understood as the creation of a new heritage tourist attraction, given that the old building was not considered as such. In both contexts, the tangible presence of a living cat has reframed each site as, at least in part, a *kawaii* (cute) attraction.

Tama and Sanjūrō's liminal status as stray or precariously housed cats is significant for how their commodification has been narrativized. Both cats were at the heritage sites of their own volition and entered into seemingly reciprocal relationships with new people; the cats were then provided with shelter, food and care, while in return humans reaped the financial benefits of their presence. The anthropomorphic language used to describe each cat's role has also sought to bolster the legitimacy of their use as living mascots. Tama's 'career' saw her ascend through the ranks to eventually become the Honorary President of Wakayama Electric Rail, while Sanjūrō _has been referred to as the 'lord' and 'owner' of his castle. Drawing on a posthumanist theorization, we understand cats as sentient,

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agentive beings whose lives are entangled with those of humans. We trace the transition in Tama and Sanjūrō's status from liminal to owned cats and the concomitant changes to their agency. Their respective appointments as stationmaster and castle lord undoubtedly resulted in greater material security for the cats. However, this came at the expense of restrictions to their mobility, possibly unwelcome handling by strangers and being made to wear clothes, which we evaluate from both animal welfare and posthumanist ethics perspectives.

The success of the original 'feline saviour', Tama, has inspired copycats around Japan, of which Sanjūrō _is just one example. Indeed, the tactic of luring tourists to train stations in particular through the appointment of animal stationmasters extends well beyond the feline realm, with dogs, rabbits, goats, foxes and even lobsters having held the role. It is therefore likely that we will see further 'kawaiification' of Japanese heritage tourism using commodified, living non-human animals in the future. While endorsing a culturally sensitive approach that respects multispecies livelihoods (Thomsen *et al*., 2021), we also call for greater appreciation of the needs and desires of domesticated animals in tourism who are often overlooked in favour of research on their wild counterparts (Young and Carr, 2018). While it is true that domesticated animals are more likely to thrive in the presence of humans, this does not preclude mistreatment and exploitation from occurring, particularly in heavily commodified tourism settings. In sharing Tama and Sanjūrō's stories, and interpreting them through a posthumanist theoretical lens, we hope to bring nuanced discussion to contemporary ethical debates regarding the roles and treatment of cats in multispecies heritage tourism contexts.

Nekonomics, Kawaii Culture and Feline Commodification

In 2016, at the time that the term 'nekonomics' was coined, Japan was going through an unprecedented 'cat boom' with domestic cats overtaking dogs as the nation's companion animal of choice. Subsequently, cats became dominant figures in popular culture, advertising, merchandise and media (Edelheim, 2021). Nekonomics is a concept that thus signifies the economic impact of cat-related consumption in Japan (Miyamoto, 2016). This consumption can be broadly divided into three categories: products and services that meet the needs of pet cats and their owners, such as cat food, toys and veterinary care; products bearing the image or form of cats, such as the Hello Kitty cartoons and associated merchandise; and commodified encounters with living cats in tourism, recreation or hospitality settings, such as cat cafés. It is this latter manifestation of nekonomics that is the main focus of our discussion in this chapter, although the commodification of live cats in tourism is inevitably intertwined with the production of cat-themed imagery in the form of digital and physical signage at tourist attractions and, of course, souvenirs.

Cats are universally recognized as cute animals, which is part of their appeal as companion animals. In Japan, this connection between cats and cuteness is modulated by the pervasive cultural phenomenon of *kawaii*, which is usually translated into English as 'cute', 'loveable' or 'adorable', and describes

a range of cultural artefacts (Crossley, 2020). Cats are thought by many people in Japan to be the epitome of kawaii, with their neotenic features, soft fur and gentle disposition, which has led to the emergence of various cat-themed *kawaii* brands such as Hello Kitty and Pusheen (Yano, 2013). *Kawaii* animals and objects are believed to have healing (*iyashi*) properties and, indeed, Miyamoto (2021) has recently written about the connection between nekonomics and the healing provided by companion animals. Cat cafes are popular hospitality settings that provide *iyashi* experiences, largely catering for customers who are unable to keep their own pets due to financial, lifestyle, accommodation or allergy issues (Plourde, 2014). These cafes represent one of the most visible forms of contemporary feline commodification and they provide an important cultural backdrop to our chosen heritage tourism settings.

The relationship between *kawaii* and heritage tourism is, perhaps understandably, one that has received little academic attention because it appears to represent such a rare configuration. However, Lee and Yan (2021) argue that cuteness is an important aesthetic in East Asia and that tourists from this part of the world may perceive certain heritage buildings as being cute. Another rare study is Ong (2021) analysis of a Hello Kitty-themed World Heritage exhibition that took place in 2006 in Macao. He

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identifies this exhibition as an example of 'cuteified heritage' – a postmodern form of edutainment that uses the *kawaii* aesthetic to communicate heritage values in a physical setting that is removed from the real heritage sites it represents. Ong argues that 'Hello Kitty and Sanrio motifs help subvert the UNESCO expert sanctioned ideals of a heritage place – authentic, academic and serious' (2021, p. 245) and that, in the process, heritage values can be communicated to a broader range of tourists. Our study builds on Ong's work by exploring cuteification within heritage tourism sites themselves. We argue that the commodification of cats at heritage tourist attractions can, as described by Ong, broaden the appeal of such sites and provide novel tools for communicating heritage values. However, a key difference is that the on-site presence of a cute cat and concomitant cat-themed representations changes the nature of the attraction itself and even has the potential to create new heritage tourist attractions.

In the context of living cats, Zhang et al. (2021) investigate how stray cats in China's Forbidden City, which is a listed World Cultural Heritage Site, have recently become a popular tourist attraction. Given that the Forbidden City charges an entrance fee, one could conclude that encounters with these cats have become commodified. Furthermore, a range of cat-themed souvenirs are also available to purchase at the site. Zhang et al. observe that many domestic tourists visit this heritage attraction with the main purpose of seeing and interacting with the cats, and that they experience enhanced wellbeing as a result. This finding resonates with the healing effects reported by cat cafe clientele and, although the authors do not explore cuteness as a dimension of the visitor experience, it is almost certain that there is a connection between the cats as cute animals and improved human wellbeing. Similar to the Japanese cases that we will shortly discuss, managers at the Forbidden City attempted to improve public relations following an attack on a British tourist by one of the cats in the 1990s by anthropomorphically referring to them as 'special 'security officers' for mice catching in the palace' (Zhang et al., 2021, p. 6). This discursive positioning of the cats as part of the attraction's workforce provided legitimacy to their presence and also potentially enhanced their cute appeal in the eyes of tourists.

Cats, Liminality and Stray Agency

In the context of ongoing animal welfare debates and concerns regarding exploitative practices, a growing number of tourism scholars have sensed the need to include non-human animals in their research. Not content with producing accounts that only foreground tourist and stakeholder voices, many researchers are now contemplating the theoretical and methodological implications of conceptualizing other animals as sentient, agentive subjects. Cohen argues that 'concentration on the human "point of view" and disregard for "the animal point of view" … is a deficiency that imposes substantial limitations on the insights and conclusions emerging from research into the dynamics of tourist–animal relations' (2020, p. 245). Posthumanism is a philosophical perspective underpinning much of this emerging scholarship, which advocates non-anthropocentrism and understands human and non-human animals as inherently entangled and co-constituting (Hamilton and Taylor, 2017; Guia, 2021). New posthumanist research is therefore inspired by the ethical potential of foregrounding non-human sentience, agency and experience. It is hoped that a deeper understanding of non-human animals may guide best practice, foster empathy in tourists and tourism stakeholders, and lead eventually to more responsible forms of tourism. Such ethical consideration for non-human animals through research in heritage tourism contexts is still in its inception (e.g. Quintero Venegas and López-López, 2021).

Our theoretical approach draws on posthumanism by conceptualizing cats as sentient agents whose lives hold intrinsic value while also being meaningfully entangled with human society. We draw on Donaldson and Kymlicka's definition of agency as 'self-willed or initiated action which carries an expectation of efficacy' (2016, p. 235), which conceptualizes agency as a situated, relational capacity to act independently and intentionally. These authors also provide a useful distinction between what they call 'micro-agency', involving decisions about what to do in the present moment, and 'macro-agency', involving more significant life decisions. One of the consequences for political and ethical

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theory of understanding other animals as agents is that we can no longer portray them as passive victims of human oppression. As Dashper argues:

> animals are not simply passive victims of human–animal relations. … Animals can choose to interact with humans or ignore them, to act or not to act in different situations, but these choices are bound by the human-centric context in which these interactions take place. As a result, agency is always relational, contextual and variable and animal agency is always limited by animals' historically- and socially-specific positioning in relation to humans.
>
> (2017, p. 210)

The challenge, of course, is to learn how to recognize and interpret these agentive acts in various different species. In the absence of language (or at least language that humans can understand), animal agency can be inferred through observing behaviour. Buller argues that 'it is predominantly through movement and through their embodied actions that animals negotiate with us and with each other. Movement then, becomes more than functionality and physiological causation, more than agency; it becomes communication' (2012, p. 145). This notion of movement as agency and interspecies communication informs our posthumanist analysis of feline actors in heritage tourism.

The socio-historic positioning of cats in relation to humans has been shaped largely by their domestication as companion animals (Serpell, 2000). As pets, domestic cats cohabit with humans and are assumed to enjoy a comfortable, symbiotic existence in which they receive shelter, sustenance and positive social interactions in return for the companionship they provide to their human families. Cats are among the most physically unrestrained of all pets and those with unsupervised access to outdoor spaces have the potential to exercise macro-agency by abandoning their household and going to live elsewhere. If not quickly adopted into a new human family, these cats become known as 'strays'; when stray cats breed, their kittens will usually be 'feral' because they are not socialized with humans (Yarri and Stober, 2019). Stray and feral cats can be conceptualized as 'liminal' in that they challenge the binary between wild and domesticated animals (Meijer, 2019). As Meijer notes, 'it is often assumed that companion cats are better off than stray or feral cats, and that cats living on the streets should be rescued, neutered and adopted by humans' (2021, p. 287). However, by exercising 'stray agency' (Meijer, 2021) these cats may resist such efforts to be controlled and socialized by humans. We thus foreground stray agency in order to theorize how our feline protagonists exercise agency, autonomy and resistance across domestic and liminal spaces throughout the course of their journeys into their respective heritage tourism settings.

Free-roaming populations of stray and feral cats are common in many parts of Japan and public opinion on them is divided (Uetake *et al*., 2014). Kito (2018) suggests that in Japanese culture animals can be regarded as either *Uchi* (inside) or *Soto* (outside) beings, with companion animals belonging to the personal space of the home and thus being considered *Uchi*. However, she argues that an animal which transitions from *Uchi* to *Soto* is controlled by the *Soto* space, regardless of its innate properties, and so stray cats and dogs are not regarded with an ethical awareness by Japanese society (Kito, 2018, p. 170). However, this position appears to be contradicted by empirical evidence suggesting that many Japanese people care for stray and feral cats by feeding them (Uetake *et al*., 2014). Feral and stray cats are also at the centre of tourist destinations such as Japan's 'cat islands' as well as attracting cat-loving tourists to cities like Onomichi in Hiroshima Prefecture, which has a famous 'cat alley' where cats can be seen. In recent years, the welfare of such cats has come increasingly under the spotlight, partly due to concerns about the risk they pose to human health as carriers of zoonoses (Seo *et al*., 2021). This has resulted in calls for stricter management of free-roaming cats, such as Seo *et al*.'s recommendation that in Onomichi 'friendly cats should be adopted rather than maintained as community cats' (2021, p. 1). Thus, there seems to be growing discomfort with the liminality and stray agency of non-owned cats in Japan.

Cats in Japanese Heritage Tourism

We now turn to our two case studies, Tama the stationmaster of Kishi Station and Sanjūrō _the lord of Bitchū _Matsuyama Castle, which illustrate nekonomics and kawaiification in Japanese heritage tourism. In telling the stories of these individual cats, we hope to subvert the dominant tendency of

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tourism research to document non-human animal collectivities rather than individual lives (Wilkinson, 2018). These stories are the product of focused ethnographic visits to the tourist attractions conducted separately by each author in 2020 and 2022 respectively. Observations of the site, human staff, tourists and cats were made, which were recorded via fieldnotes and photographs. As Tama passed away in 2015, observations at Kishi Station focused on her feline successors, Nitama and Yontama. In addition to these ethnographic visits, a qualitative document analysis was conducted to provide background information on the development of each tourist attraction. Despite the technical distinction between stray and feral cats that was drawn in the literature review, it has been difficult to determine which category the cats in our analysis belong to. In some cases, this is because the origin of the cat is unknown. In other cases, written accounts are ambiguous because in Japanese there is often no linguistic distinction made between stray and feral cats; both are simply referred to as '*noraneko*'.

Tama: stationmaster of Kishi Station

Kishi Station is a railway station on the Kishigawa Line in rural Wakayama Prefecture. First opened in 1933, it used to be a rather small and unremarkable station. Although Kishi Station may have been considered by some to be a heritage building and attracted visiting train enthusiasts, it was not originally a heritage tourist attraction of any significance. However, the fate of the station began to change in 2004 when a financial crisis on the rail line, due to low passenger numbers, threatened it with closure. Tama had been born to a stray cat called Miko and was raised by a shopkeeper at Kishi Station along with another stray cat, Chibi. Interestingly, however, both Japanese and English media frequently refer to Tama as a stray cat. As a result of the financial crisis, a review of Kishi Station's maintenance policy was conducted and there was a possibility that the cats would not be permitted to remain at the shop where they were living. As a solution to this dilemma, the shopkeeper who took care of the cats and did not want to see them moved, proposed to Mitsunobu Kojima, the president of Wakayama Electric Railway, that Tama should be appointed as a feline 'stationmaster' and, in 2007, this appointment took place (Nonaka, 2021). Miko and Chibi were appointed as Tama's assistants, so they too were able to stay.

Fig. 11.1. *Tama Museum Kishi Station. (Photo by author.)*

Tama's appointment as stationmaster marked a turning point for Kishi Station. Visitors from all over Japan began to arrive in Wakayama to meet this famous cat, who was occasionally made to wear a cute, anthropomorphic uniform that included a custom-made hat and name badge that hung from her collar. A lighter version of the hat was even crafted for the summer months to prevent Tama from overheating. Railway passenger numbers increased to such a degree that both the line and station were saved from closure. In 2009, a new 'Tama Train' began to operate on the line, which was decorated inside and out with cute cartoon depictions of Tama. A year later, the main building of Kishi Station, which had been deteriorating, was rebuilt in the shape of a cat's head with the word 'TAMA' placed on its ridge. In its new form, the station is now referred to as the 'Tama Museum Kishi Station' (Fig. 11.1). Inside, a new seating area, café and gift shop containing Tama-themed merchandise were created in order to provide a more comprehensive visitor experience for tourists. The *kawaii* aesthetic infuses the whole experience, from the cartoon version of Tama in sign-form greeting visitors at the entrance, to the anthropomorphic Tama Train with whiskers painted on its 'face' (front end), to the cat-shaped desserts available at the café (Fig. 11.2).

Fig. 11.2. *The Tama Train. (Photo by author.)*

Tama's 'career' saw her ascend through the ranks to eventually become the Honorary President of Wakayama Electric Rail before her death in 2015 at the age of 16 years, after which she was enshrined at the station and deified. Today, Tama has two successors, Nitama (Tama II) and Yontama (Tama IV), who are also former stray female calico cats, thus evoking the image and spirit of the original feline stationmaster (Videsjorden, 2020, p. 38). Currently, both cats 'work' 6 hours a day, 5 days a week, during which time they are confined to glass cages. Nitama spends her 'shifts' at Kishi Station, while Yontama's shifts are split between Kishi and Idakiso Station further along the line (Figs 11.3 and 11.4). The cages are about one-metre wide and deep, with a litter tray at the bottom, a cat bed and several ledges leading upwards to the top of the cage, which extends to the ceiling. On one of the ledges in

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each cage is a tiny stationmaster hat. The cage at Kishi Station opens on one side to the gift shop, allowing staff to reach in and pet the cat with ease, whereas the cage at Idakiso Station is completely sealed. Signs inform visitors in Japanese, Chinese and English not to use flash photography or beat on the windowpanes. However, we observed several people lightly tapping on the glass who were not stopped by staff. Unlike the early days of Tama's residence at the station, visitors are now unable to touch the stationmaster cats and must content themselves with taking photographs of them instead.

It is estimated that Tama's presence contributed ¥1.1 billion to the local economy during her years of active service at Kishi Station, making her a true nekonomic success story that other railway stations and tourist attractions in Japan have tried to emulate (Videsjorden, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, tourist numbers have dropped significantly, threatening the station financially once again. In 2021, the railway's management launched a newly designed vehicle called the 'Tama Train Museum' amid much publicity in the hope of once again reaping the nekonomic rewards of their feline saviour (Nonaka, 2021). In terms of its connection to heritage tourism, Kishi Station has been physically and representationally transformed from an inconspicuous rail heritage building into a brand new tourist attraction that combines rail heritage and the *iyashi* (healing) power of cute cats. Furthermore, we can conceptualize the 'Tama Museum Kishi Station' as the creation of a new, *kawaii* cultural heritage site, in which the legacy of Tama, who is now so much a part of the local community's story, is commemorated. However, further down the line at Idakiso Station, recently installed information panels documenting various historically significant rail structures make no mention of the stationmaster cats, thus signalling a divergence between traditional and kawaiified heritage narratives.

Fig. 11.3. Nitama's cage at Kishi Station. (Photo by author.)

Fig. 11.4. Yontama's cage at Idakiso Station. (Photo by author.)

An important part of the narrative surrounding Tama is that she was a cat already residing at Kishi Station; she was not purchased or brought in from elsewhere against her will. Kishi Station was already Tama's home and her apparent lack of resistance to wearing a 'uniform' or performing 'duties' gave the impression that her appointment as feline stationmaster was consensual in nature. Her transition from being precariously housed to having the material securities afforded by being a stationmaster framed Tama's appointment as a symbiotic relationship benefiting both the feline and human parties. However, this transition came with certain costs as well, including restrictions to her mobility and the inconvenience of having to wear a hat, even if it was designed to be very lightweight. In her first few years as feline stationmaster, Tama was kept in her 'office' (a glass cage) but was also allowed to sit on a cushion outside the ticket office for visitors to inspect her more closely and have photos taken with her. However, as the station grew in popularity, management of the cats became stricter and nowadays Nitama and Yontama appear to remain in their cages during 'work' hours.

Sanjūrō: lord of Bitchū Matsuyama Castle

Bitchū Matsuyama Castle in Takahashi City of Okayama Prefecture is also called the 'castle in the sky' as it appears to be floating among clouds on autumn and winter mornings when clouds cover the surrounding valleys. It was originally built in 1240 and is counted as one of Japan's more prominent castles, especially as it is one of the few that was not rebuilt with a concrete base and structure after the Second World War, but rather refurbished in an original style using local timber. The castle sits atop a 430-metre-high hill 20 min' drive or an hour's walk away from Takahashi city. Due to its elevated location, it played an important role in the warring period ahead of the Edo era as it was easy to protect, and its location gave its owners a good view of the surrounding landscape. This became, however, also its major disadvantage in the peaceful time that followed, and by early Showa era it was mostly just in ruins. It was thanks to a major restoration effort by townspeople that it was returned to its former glory (Nishimatsu, 2019).

Bitchū Matsuyama gained in popularity as a heritage tourist attraction during the 2000s, often with the help of different media linkages. Pictures of the 'castle in the sky' were linked to anime films, and in 2016 images of it featured in the opening scenes of *Sanada Maru*, NHK's annual 'Taiga Drama' (a 50-episode-long historical drama shown once a week by the national broadcaster on prime time television). Visitor numbers rose 1000-fold during the 2000s, and the annual visitor count in 2016 was

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106,000. The road leading up to the castle was, however, severely damaged by torrential rain in 2018, making it impossible for heavier vehicles to get up to the previous turning point, and even for the castle's service vehicles to make it to the castle. This had a drastic impact on visitor flows to the castle, and could have been disastrous for the attraction had it not been for a cat stepping in as its 'saviour'. The same heavy rain that damaged the roads up to the castle also caused flooding in Takahashi City and one resident who apparently decided to relocate for higher ground was a yellow and white tabby cat. Caretakers found the cat when they arrived on foot to the castle a few weeks after the torrential rain. This was surprising as no humans live in the vicinity and it is a strenuous walk for anybody to get up there. The cat seemed to have taken a liking to the surroundings and, despite being free to leave, he stayed put in the castle. Visitors started returning when they heard about the friendly cat who greeted visitors to 'his' castle. This became a media hit in Japan with major newspapers and television stations reporting on the cat taking up residence in the castle. The local tourism association decided therefore to officially proclaim him the castle lord, giving him the name Sanjūrō in reference to a local samurai family that had served as warriors defending Osaka in the warring period (Nishimatsu, 2019). The large influx of visitors who came to see Sanjūrō became the catalyst for the tourism association to repair all access roads, and visitor numbers have since surpassed the records set before the castle got its feline lord.

Fig. 11.5. *Sanjūrō _on a leash in his day-bed in front of Bitchū _Matsuyama Castle. (Photo by author.)*

Sanjūrō's journey to becoming a castle lord was, however, rather fraught. Shortly after the initial wave of publicity, a couple arrived at the castle claiming that Sanjūrō was in fact their cat called 'Natsume' (Nishimatsu, 2019). They had taken him in as a stray but he had seemed unsettled at their house and escaped from the balcony after only a short time. Seeing how much more settled the newly named Sanjūrō looked at Bitchū Matsuyama Castle, the couple decided that it was in his best interests to remain there. More drama unfolded when Sanjūrō disappeared for 2 days after an unwelcome trip to the vets and then, not long afterwards, ran away for nearly 3 weeks. When he was eventually found, Sanjūrō had lost a significant amount of weight and the castle management had been inconvenienced by the loss of their new, prized asset (Nishimatsu, 2019). A plan was thus devised to establish a mutually beneficial arrangement whereby Sanjūrō would be contained within the castle grounds – his stray agency was perceived as a problem.

Under this new arrangement, Sanjūrō is kept in a large cage within the castle at night and during the day he has a routine that consists of two meals, two supervised walks around the castle grounds, and two sessions during which tourists can photograph and interact with him. In order to prevent him from running away again, Sanjūrō is now taken for walks on a leash and harness (which he does not seem to mind) by one of his 'human servants' (Nishimatsu, 2019, p. 109). However, during one of our visits to Bitchū Matsuyama, visitors were told that Sanjūrō would not be taking his morning walk since it was too hot that day. Instead, he slept and groomed in a covered bed in the castle courtyard while being guarded by a member of staff (Fig. 11.5). This indicates that Sanjūrō's routine is not set in stone, and that his welfare is prioritized over tourists' desires to see him perform. In addition to his walks, Sanjūrō can also wander around the castle courtyard while on a long leash. On occasions, Sanjūrō _has been seen dressed in tiny, custom-made samurai outfits, the images of which have led to viral popularity on social media. However, it appears that Sanjūrō only wears these outfits for very short periods of time during promotional photoshoots and that most of the time he only has a collar on (Fig. 11.6).

Fig. 11.6. *Photobook at Bitchū Matsuyama Castle showing images of Sanjūrō from 2020. (Photo by author.)*

Sanjūrō's photographic and cartoon image is used on souvenirs, such as keyrings, stickers and biscuits. There is even a Sanjūrō-themed taxi in Takahashi City! At the castle itself, cartoon Sanjūrō can be found acting as a cute guide on various signs asking visitors to comply with COVID-19 social distancing rules. It is clear that he is a recent addition to the castle, as all of the permanent displays focus exclusively on the castle's history as a heritage building rather than on the presence of its feline castle lord. In February 2022, a stone bench bearing a sculpture of Sanjūrō sitting on a cushion was installed in front of the castle for tourists to use as a photography spot (Fig. 11.7). The bench can be interpreted as a physical change to the heritage site brought about by a process of nekonomic

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kawaiification that embodies and commemorates the latest phase of Bitchū Matsuyama Castle's evolution.

Fig. 11.7. *New bench at Bitchū _Matsuyama Castle featuring a statue of Sanjūrō. (Photo by author.)*

Discussion

Japan's feline stationmasters and castle lord represent the alignment of usually separate cultural elements: heritage and *kawaii*. Although these living mascots may seem like a very niche form of animal-related tourism, they can be interpreted as manifestations of the broader phenomenon of nekonomics, which has proven to be a powerful socio-economic force in Japan (Miyamoto, 2016). As our case studies reveal, the presence of a cute, anthropomorphically framed cat at heritage sites can diversify and grow the attraction's visitor base, leading to significant financial rewards. Given that this is the case, we predict that there will be further kawaiification of Japanese heritage tourism in the future. However, beyond this economic impact, kawaiification also appears to entail a discursive and even material reimagining of heritage. Rather than simply being gimmicks that have no modifying effect on the heritage tourist attraction within which they are situated, Sanjūrō, Tama and her successors have become integrated with the castle and rail heritage narratives at their respective sites. This entanglement has been further embedded through physical alterations to the sites, such as the extensive cat-themed rebuild of Kishi Station or the more modest addition of the new cat-sculpture bench at Bitchū Matsuyama Castle. While Ong (2021) has expressed support for 'cuteification' strategies that can broaden the appeal of heritage, for some the physical alteration of heritage sites may prove to be a step too far if it is perceived as eroding their authenticity or damaging historically significant structures.

The successful integration of our feline saviours into the tourism system was facilitated by narratives portraying them as freely choosing to live at the heritage sites (at least initially) and enjoying an enhanced quality of life as a result. The cats' celebrated transition from stray, or precariously housed, to owned reflects a growing sentiment in Japanese society that liminal 'community cats' need to be more carefully managed and controlled (Seo *et al*., 2021). However, while the notion that Tama and Sanjūrō willingly submitted to their new captivity and 'duties' may be appealing to tourists because it diminishes concerns regarding potential mistreatment, the reality of the situation is more complex. In the case of Sanjūrō, an initial choice to live at Bitchū Matsuyama Castle was quickly followed by several macro-agentive attempts to relocate elsewhere. It is possible that he was searching for other cats with which to socialize or breed. Sanjūrō's stray agency and apparent resistance to being owned were deemed problematic by the castle's staff and, as a result, he is now prevented from leaving the castle grounds (Nishimatsu, 2019). While Tama may not have displayed the same desire to wander, she too had her mobility limited, as did her successors Nitama and Yontama. Effectively, the cats' liminality and stray agency were erased through their integration into the heritage tourist attractions.

It is understandable that the humans caring for these cats may have wanted to restrict their movements due to safety concerns; indeed, a feline stationmaster in Kyushu who enjoyed a greater degree of freedom was recently hit by a car and killed while taking an evening stroll (Baseel, 2021). Sanjūrō was also found to have lost a significant amount of weight during his lengthier escapade, indicating that his freedom came at a cost to his health (Nishimatsu, 2019). There is clearly a tension between the viewpoint that cats, as domesticated animals, require human care and management, and manifestations of feline stay agency in which cats choose a riskier, less comfortable existence beyond the confines of pet ownership. Agency is one of several posthumanist ethical dimensions that requires consideration when evaluating the practice of keeping living mascots at tourist attractions. In order to meet the expectations of tourists and to function as an attractor, the cats are required to be at the heritage sites at certain times. Beyond appeals to their safety, other rhetorical strategies are used by the tourist attractions to legitimize restrictions to the cats' mobility, such as anthropomorphically positioning the stationmasters as having 'duties' and 'work hours' (as well as days off).

While a more extensive study would be required to ascertain fully the welfare status of these cats, our preliminary observations indicate that they are generally well cared for, supervised by staff at all times and not normally made to wear clothes other than during ceremonial occasions or

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promotional photoshoots. However, while Sanjūrō is able to spend a significant portion of his day outside and can take walks on a leash, the level of confinement experienced by the feline stationmasters is far more restrictive. On a recent visit to Idakiso Station, Yontama appeared agitated and frustrated; she paced inside her cage, meowed repeatedly and stared intensely at something that had caught her attention on the platform. Some of these behaviours may indicate the development of stereotypies, although further observations would be required to confirm this. The large name tag on Yontama's collar swung from side to side and knocked loudly against the sides of the cage as she walked, which may be irritating for her. Nitama appears unable to use the small ledges inside her cage due to her large size, diminishing the usable space within the cage. Although both cages appear to meet welfare requirements in terms of dimensions, they may be lacking in terms of enrichment and social contact (Stella *et al*., 2017). It was also concerning to observe the repeated flouting of rules as visitors tapped on the stationmaster cats' cage windows.

A posthumanist perspective can be used to critique the practice of keeping living mascots at heritage tourist attractions on the basis that the animals' needs and desires are positioned hierarchically below those of humans. It is clear that tourists' desire to see and photograph the cats, and the economic benefits that these tourists bring to other humans in the area, are of primary importance to the operators. It would have been possible, for example, to create a larger, more enriched cage at Kishi Station during its rebuild, but this would have reduced space within the gift shop – thus impeding the station's ability to profit from the feline stationmasters. While many of the cats' basic welfare needs appear to be met, it is possible that their lives are not as fulfilling as they would be if they were allowed to roam more freely and socialize with other cats. However, simply turning these cats loose would almost surely condemn them to greater suffering and a shorter life, while also potentially having a negative impact on native wildlife. We believe that it is possible for mutually beneficial interspecies relationships to occur in tourism but that more needs to be done to understand the needs and desires of domesticated animals to raise them from their current subordinate status.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have analysed two tourism settings in Japan that can be conceptualized as sites of emergent, negotiated human–feline relations in which cats actively, if unwittingly, co-create kawaiified heritage. The popularity of the cats on the Kishigawa Line and Bitchū Matsuyama Castle demonstrate how nekonomics can rapidly turn around the fortunes of heritage sites. However, the practice of keeping commodified living mascots at tourist attractions comes with significant ethical responsibilities and practical challenges. While we believe that such arrangements can in some cases be mutually beneficial for both the human and non-human actors involved, our research reveals cause for concern regarding extreme restrictions to the cats' mobility at Kishi and Idakiso Stations. It is possible to create a middle ground between unrestricted stray agency and confinement in tiny cages, which ensures that human enjoyment of living mascots does not come at the expense of the animals' welfare. This appears to have been achieved at Bitchū Matsuyama Castle, where Sanjūrō is available for tourists to view but is also enabled to wander the castle grounds in a safe, supervised manner. However, this arrangement calls into question whether Sanjūrō's agency is being sufficiently respected. The cases we have examined reveal the complex interplay between economics, *kawaii* culture and interspecies relationality, highlighting the need for further posthumanist research into multispecies heritage tourism contexts involving domesticated animals.

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