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# Vulnerability in the City: Reading Healing Narratives in East Asian Animal Films

## Abstract

Narratives of mourning and healing have become a popular discourse in films about animal-human relationships set in the contemporary East Asian urban milieu. From the mainstream to the arthouse, from micro films to personal documentaries, images of the dying pet have triggered poignant revelations about human existence. While most of these films focus on the process of how the human protagonists come to the enlightening moment of self-understanding through the grieving experience, the deaths of their animal companions are often the imperative origins of such self-making. Interestingly, the cause of these animals' loss is either evaded by or mirrored through human illness in these cinematic Bildungsromane. Given such a lacuna in the interpretive context, how do we read these textual animals who are dying in the arms of their fragile human companions? How do the interspecies life-and-death stories illuminate the dialectics of alienation and intimacy of the city dwellers? How does the claustrophobic timespace of the cinematic medium articulate and habituate these affective stories of failures and recovery? How do we produce a critical reflection on the imaginary of vulnerability, the ethics of care, and fabulations of inadequacy and sentimentality in the cosmopolitan East Asian cities where pet-keeping is becoming en vogue and a sign of economic prosperity? Through a comparative study of *Quill* (dir. Yochi Sai, Japan, 2004), *Gu Gu The Cat* (dir. Isshin Inudo, Japan, 2008), and *This Darling Life* (dir. Angie Chen, Hong Kong, 2008), this paper attempts to examine the urban phenomenon that while animals have become vital participants of everyday life, human beings are facing a (de)pressing need to rethink their affective network with these nonhuman urban residents. These stories of failures – the failure of language in articulating the loss of the animal other in the human milieu as well as the failure of knowing oneself until the inconceivable moment of loss and death – signify the therapeutic journey in which the seeking of interpretation beyond language becomes an essential process toward a more limpid subjectivity both within and outside the narrative chronotope. By studying the representation of selected 'cute' animal images and their tragic deaths on East Asian screens, this paper aims at exploring the transference of vulnerability and power between the animal beings and their human counterparts.

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**Keywords:** *East Asian cinema, bereavement, healing narratives, pet loss, urban culture, vulnerability*

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*Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster. You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again.*

*Anonymous, 'Rainbow Bridge'<sup>1</sup>*

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Nostalgic in tone and lulling in its way of describing the resuscitated animal companions in the heavenly after-world, the anonymously written prose poem 'Rainbow Bridge' allows the human mourners to overcome their bereavement of pet loss by suggesting that we are anticipating the day of reunion to come. Waiting for us in this holy meadow, all our pets who died in our lifetime will be 'restored to health and vigour'; they will all play happily without the worry of hunger and cold until the day we also depart from the living world and meet them again. Popularly circulating on the internet in verbal and visual forms, such a hopeful and wish-fulfilling imagery of the animal-human reunion-to-come in a place similar to the Garden of Eden seems to successfully soothe the troubled souls of the humans who cannot subdue the grief of the animal death at present, even though this imaginary may have over-romanticised the loss by idealising a future reunion. The 'Rainbow Bridge' has also become the business symbol for many pet-funeral services like cremation services and the setting of gravestones or memorial boxes across different cultures. Because the average lifespan of companion species is much shorter than that of humans, people who live together with animal companions would be prepared to encounter this day

when their beloved ones pass away after the natural process of aging and illness, but it is always hard to accept this fact when the day suddenly arrives and strikes people unaware. Imagining this future reunion or limbo in such a romanticised and anthropocentric manner would serve to transfer and defer the impasse resulting from the deep pain of loss, the heavy sense of guilt at not being able to take care of the animal companions, and the helplessness in venting the affect.

Alongside the widespread circulation of the myth of the Rainbow Bridge across different social media and various cultural contexts, there has been a growing number of animal-related films in various East Asian regions telling stories about the intimate bonding between human and pet animals in the urban context since the 2000s.<sup>2</sup> Instead of portraying an idealistic world of fluffy animals and glittering-eyed human children playing in the afterlife wonderland of the Rainbow Bridge, narratives of mourning and healing have become a popular discourse in these films about animal-human relationships set in the contemporary East Asian urban milieu where the interspecies relationship is largely distinct from that in the rural environment. The rapid urban developments in most East Asian cities have triggered a stressful condition of on-going spatial changes accompanied by an urgent need to maintain the cross-species affectivity in new light. From mainstream melodramas to personal documentaries, images of the dying pet have triggered poignant revelations about human existence. While most of these films focus on the process of how the human protagonists come to the enlightening moment of self-understanding through the grieving experience, the deaths of their animal companions are often the imperative origins of such self-making. Interestingly, the cause of these animals' loss is either evaded or mirrored through human illness in these cinematic *Bildungsromane*. Given such an anthropocentric lacuna in the interpretive context, how do we read these cinematic animals who are dying in the arms of their fragile human companions? How do the interspecies life-and-death stories illuminate the dialectics of alienation and intimacy of the city dwellers? How do the claustrophilic time-space of the cinematic medium and the enclosing narratives of finitude articulate and habituate these affective stories of failures and recovery? How do we produce a critical reflection on the imaginary of vulnerability, the ethics of care, and fabulations of inadequacy and sentimentality in the cosmopolitan East Asian cities where pet-keeping is becoming a vogue and a sign of economic prosperity?

Through a comparative study of *Quill* (dir. Yoichi Sai, Japan, 2004), *This Darling Life* (dir. Angie Chen, Hong Kong, 2008), and *Gu Gu the Cat* (dir. Isshin Inudo, Japan, 2008), this

essay attempts to examine the urban phenomenon that while pet animals have shifted in status from disappearing to vital participants in everyday life, human beings are facing a (de)pressing need to rethink their affective network with these nonhuman urban residents. In his seminal 1980 essay ‘Why look at animals?’ John Berger outlines the process by which animals are gradually disappearing in the modern cities in the form of zoo exhibits, toy representations, and pets since the emergence of modern consumer society. I would argue that in contemporary cities, especially the speedily developing ones in Asia, pet animals have returned their gazes to their human companions in a way that exposes human vulnerability and projects the problematical urban experience which is difficult to resolve. Their inevitable deaths in the narrative frames of these selected films in fact do not foreclose but disclose an awareness of human vulnerability, which in turn contributes to a means of therapeutic self-discovery of the human subjects through the body of the animals. These stories of failures – the failure of language in articulating the loss of the animal other in the human milieu as well as the failure of knowing oneself until the inconceivable moment of loss and death – signify the therapeutic journey in which the seeking of interpretation beyond language becomes an essential process toward a more limpid subjectivity both within and outside the narrative chronotope. By studying the representation of selected ‘cute’ animal images and their tragic deaths on East Asian screens, this essay aims at exploring the transference of vulnerability and power between the animal beings and their human counterparts.

### **Tales of vulnerability – healing narratives on screen**

To begin with, I would like to explain how these three chosen films provide three different examples of the healing narratives. These three films are based on life stories of either the animals or the humans. *Quill* is a cinematic re-enactment of the life of a guide dog in Japan called Quill, whose life from birth to death has been originally captured in a photographic series by Japanese photographer Ryohei Akimoto,<sup>3</sup> followed by a novel *The Life of Quill, the Seeing-Eye Dog* by Ryohei Akimoto and Kengo Ishiguro, a TV drama adaptation of the novel, a photo-documentary film, and several other related books. *This Darling Life* is an auto-biographical documentary of Hong Kong director Angie Chen containing eight different stories about pet animals and their human companions, including the director herself. *Gu Gu the Cat* is based on a

semi-autobiographic manga series under the same title, written and illustrated by Japanese artist Yumiko Oshima, whose poetic persona is projected through the protagonist Asako in the film.

In these tales of life and deaths, belonging and abandonment, illness and healing, regret and helplessness, gain and loss, reunion and separation, human beings are all portrayed as more stranded than the animal protagonists. The heart-wrenching situations in these films are set against stories of disabilities, illness, aging, abandonment, missed chances and disappointments between the humans and their pets, or the animals and their human counterparts. Most of these stories also contain an implied account of an expanding urban environment from the past to present in a slow and silent pace on screen. Set in the criss-crossing spheres of the personal, the domestic and the communal, these three films draw on the impact of the non-human animals in their social contexts, ranging from the welcoming attitudes towards the social role of the guide dog and cohabitation of humans and feral cats in the local community in Japan, to the forbidden existence of animal companions in housing estates and the interdependence of a homeless man and his dog sharing their invisible presences in the urban space of Hong Kong.

Central to these films are the themes of death and mourning. The sad and tragic deaths of these pet cats and dogs are often symbolic of a liminal moment in human life from childhood to adulthood, from illness to recovery, from separation to reunion, from a lack of self-care to the recognition of such need, or the impossibility of reversing such processes. One might argue that the deaths of the animals on screen seem to justify the ritualised, sacrificial murder of the animals. Although the cinematic animal deaths can be understood as a trope of anthropocentrism that patronises animals, as it is explained in Lippit (162–70, 187–88) and Shukin (150–52), my focus here rests on addressing how humans recognise their own weaknesses through the inevitable and uncontrollable deaths of their beloved animal companions. The cinematic representation of the deaths of the animal companions acts as an important mediator that allows the protagonists to arrive at the moment of agency. This moment is achieved by the human protagonists through the mixture of recognising their vulnerability and developing a strong sense of self in relation to the affective anchorage to the other.

If we want to assert our agency, we also have to admit our own inexorable vulnerability. The protagonists in the three films have undergone the process of self-discovery through realising their human vulnerability, as a result of their experience of overcoming the deaths of

the companion animals. Drawing upon various Western philosophical discussions about the universal significance of vulnerability to human existence, bioethicist Michael Kottow defines vulnerability as *conditio humana* (283), or one feature of the human condition that includes a self-awareness of existential limitations such as inevitability of death and the on-going search for the meaning of life. He states, citing from Rendtorff who is inspired by Levinas, that vulnerability is almost already an ethical concept that describes and qualifies personal integrity. While our society has been guided by a ‘vulnerability reducing agenda’ (283) that aims at reducing or correcting all kinds of vulnerability-related symptoms such as physical weakness, suffering, and disability, it seems that we might mistakenly assume that our intrinsic vulnerability can be healed. Kottow notes, ‘[v]ulnerability is an essential attribute of mankind to be acknowledged, whereas susceptibility is a specific and accidental condition to be diagnosed and treated’ (284). The protagonists in the three films all come across as being in a state of susceptibility, either in the form of their own illness or that of the animal companions, before they arrive at the acknowledgement of their intrinsic vulnerability. Therefore, the multilayered forms of fragility in the films, from the animal companions’ aging, illness and death to the human-counterparts’ sense of guilt at not caring for the animals enough, their own personal worries related to their social life, as well as their own physical deterioration and diagnosis, have shown what Levinas would call the opening to others through the sensibility resulted from proximity and vulnerability. Levinas notes, ‘Maternity, vulnerability, responsibility, proximity, contact – sensibility can slip toward touching, palpation, openness upon ..., consciousness of ..., pure knowing taking images from the “intact being,” informing itself about the palpable quiddity of things’ (76). The final moment when the humans touch the soft, fragile, and cottony bodies of the animals, and exchange the last eye contact with their companions, is the time when they have eventually opened themselves to an intuitive sensitivity. This is also the moment of passivity that Levinas describes as the ethical relation with the Other. The deterministic moment of dying becomes therefore the opportunistic opening to realisation and yet incapability of executing the responsibility for others, resulting in one’s self-awakening with a passive sensibility of vulnerability. As the Latin origin of vulnerability suggests, *vulnus* is the wound, which is an opening point of weakness, prone to either infection or healing. Therefore, such an understanding of vulnerability as human condition, or a self-reflective awareness of human’s limited existence, is not simply one’s recognition of mortality. Vulnerability is a welcoming opening to the others by accepting one’s own limitations.

In order to understand this process of self-awakening through the cinematic narrative medium, the concept of *Bildungsroman* or the developmental literary genre would be a useful way to read these films. To quote from Tobias Boes on Karl Morgenstern, such a narrative genre does not only gaze ‘inward, at the development of its fictional protagonist, but outward, into the real world and toward the development of its audience’ (648). In other words, the developmental genre does not represent a turn away from the public sphere; rather, it illustrates the inseparability, or even the dialogical formation of the individual, the public, and the historical. I found such insistence on the pedagogical values of the developmental novel and the trust in the ability of literary works to shape and cultivate the holistic individual particularly useful in reading the cinematic interspecies stories that heavily register the growth of the vulnerable human through affective engagement with the animal other. Such an affective engagement could be stretched beyond the narrative chronotope as the cinematic medium has been powerfully structuring the way we see and understand the non-human species in the contemporary everyday urban context. This is especially the case when most of these mediated images are represented in a sentimental manner.

In Rey Chow’s study of the sentimental that is recurrent in contemporary Chinese cinema, she evokes an illuminating discussion of various imagined relationships that can also apply to the discussion of animal-human stories here today. Although Chow focuses on the Chinese cultural context in explaining the ideological imagination and accumulation of the sentimental in the global circulation of Chinese cinematic experience, her intricate reading and analysis of Friedrich Schiller’s concept of the sentimental is instructive in our understanding of these sentimental tales about the nonhuman animals. As she states, the sentimental is not only understood as ‘an instance of affect’ but also ‘a relation of time’; the sentimental is ‘an affective state triggered by a sense of loss,’ and sentimentalism is ‘the symptom of the apprehension of an irreversible temporal differentiation or the passing of time’ (15). This ‘symptom’ is ‘mediated by and accessible through aesthetic and cultural form’ (Chow 15). By means of cinematic representations, the finitude of the animals suggest the temporal limitedness experienced by the living beings, and the sentimental would most effectively evoke this limitedness in a transmissible manner in the cinematic chronotope. The sentimental as a temporal symptom is also worth further discussion in the East Asian cinematic context where it has become a popular currency in narrating stories about human conditions under the speedy and ceaseless



modernisation and urbanisation. The fast-changing cities, growing modern infrastructures and the rapid demolition of the old, have not only illustrated the kaleidoscopic features of global modernity. They also highlight the urgency of grasping the sense of loss in face of more changes to come. The sentimental deaths of the animal companions on screens have therefore become reminders of the need to address the anxiety of not being able to recognise the fleeting sense of loss in face of changes.

According to Tuan Yi-fu's observation made in the 1980s, 'the highly sentimentalized view of animals was uniquely developed' as a result of 'the growing distance between people and nature' (112). Interestingly, this growing distance has now become synonymous with the shrinking distance between humans and the non-human species who are domesticated as companion animals especially in the cities. While reading the animals' response to human beings has been a philosophical concern from Aristotle to Derrida, human responses to animals are often captured in the dialectic of alienation and intimacy, of affection and fear, of desire and disgust, of ownership and dispossession. The pathos and ethos related to the inter-species encounters are becoming more problematic as pet-keeping in the urban space is becoming a vogue and a sign of economic prosperity, especially in the East Asian cities. The power dynamics between humans and other species, as indicated from that of the human relationships with their companion animals, are characterised by reciprocal care and attention (Gruen 157). The urban pet-keepers are not only often regarded as having substantial disposable incomes in order to feed and care for these animals; they are also forming families that include animal companions as symbolic children and grandchildren. Young and retired couples in the city keep cats and dogs in place of actual offspring. Keeping a pet animal, be it a fish, a bird, a lizard, a cat, a pig, or a dog, connotes an inevitable affective connection within the domestic sphere. These animals are included as individual family members with assigned names and possessing particular personalities. Pet, as its etymology of the Irish word *peata* suggests, is a tame animal that enters human domestic space. The discourses of protection, obedience, belonging, sympathy, the sentient and the sentimental are well shared and communicated within this affective sphere of domesticity where animal species are actually devoid of speech.

Human emotional attachment to animal species is based on communication that is also incommunicable in terms of linguistic capability. Humans cannot exchange ideas and thoughts with the pet animals through human sign systems. It is only a one-way communication that lacks

reciprocity even when animals are ‘trained’ to respond to signals. To most people, this limitrophe nature of the borderline between humans and other animal species is defined by human language. Although Derrida has reminded us of the multiplicity of animal species and that the human-animal distinction should not be simply drawn by human sign systems in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, such a verbal gap has been used as an opportunity for human interpretation of animals’ thoughts according to their own interests. The speechless pet is thus an ideal human as a result – the reassuring presence of pet animals who can never speak back or disagree with us is better at calming a stressed human than is a spouse. As Marjorie Garber has rightly noted, the close bond we form with animals has in effect further humanised us (32). Human qualities are therefore often reinforced and emerged in representations of animals, which are often related to imagery of childishness, innocence, loyalty, authenticity and vulnerability.

These human qualities are realised, reinforced, and healed through the healing narrative structured by the affective engagement between animals and their human companions. Healing narratives usually refer to the medical practice of narrative construction and storytelling in the clinical treatment of patients, especially cancer patients, who often undergo prolonged and uncertain processes of diagnosis and therapy. In the healing process, patients are invited and encouraged to create or attend to a narrative since it is believed that this active and constructive process helps the patients to make sense of their illness and encourages them. As a healing practice for patients of acute illness, ‘narratives are often fragmentary or undeveloped; where narratives are most coherent, they may also be formulaic and distant from the sufferer’s experience. Prior to narratization, salient illness experiences are apprehended and extended through metaphor ...’ (Kirmayer 153). Other than the use of metaphors to make sense of the fragmentary illness experience, the patient is also encouraged to reshape personal memories in order to arrive at a therapeutic goal of constructing a ‘morally valued and conceptually coherent identity and sense of self’ (Kirmayer 154). This epistemological aspect of illness is crucial in finding a way of ordering and restoring experience, especially when the patient’s subjectivity is turned fragmented and unknowable in the diagnosis and healing process.

I find the concept of healing narrative relevant in reading the three films in this essay. In addition to having the patients making sense of their own illness and death, the involvement of their pet animals in these cinematic narratives provides another perspective on the reading of healing narratives – the human in this narrative is not only the subject or narrative persona, but

also the object in the gaze of the animals who also experience illness and death in the same narrative chronotope. The representation of the aging or sick animals interestingly mirrors that of their human companions. The moment of epiphany is often expressed through the death of the pet animals, whose feelings about their own dying are impossible to render except through a transmission of affect to and from the human counterparts.

If death is the unthinkable moment when language is always inadequate and sometimes unnecessary, cinematic images might, as Richard Armstrong writes about mourning films, ‘offer more astute ways into the experience of grief than words do’ (8) since ‘grief and cinema are about making sense of absence’ (15) and therefore images can produce and reveal the nature of grief more effectively than words. In these films of mourning, the protagonists’ process of making sense of death is similar to what the spectators do as they make sense of the cinematic images projected on to the screen. It is among the crossing trajectories of the re-enactment of the animal-human stories, the onscreen mourning, the healing process within the narrative, and the evocation of affect off-screen that our vulnerability is realised and felt as transmissible, fluid, and interpretative.

### ***Quill - the dog who is eternally infantile***

*Quill* narrates the life story of a guide dog named Quill - so named because of a quill-like marking on his body, identifying him as the unique one among the five puppies given birth to by his mother. Like Hachiko, the famous Japanese dog whose story has been represented in films and TV series<sup>4</sup>, Quill was a real Labrador dog who was born in 1986 and died in 1998. The film *Quill* is the second re-enactment of his life on screen. Similar to the genre of biopic with a chronological narrative structure, this film begins with the birth of the dog, followed by episodes about his growing up and becoming a guide dog, and ends with his death.

As Erica Fudge claims in her discussion of *Lassie Come-Home*:

the stories told about dogs ... are never really about dogs at all, they are always about humans. These are stories that tell of a desire for completion – for self-knowledge, self-possession, security and stability – but which also have the potential to record – in the dog’s death or disappearance – the fragility of such self-knowledge, self-possession,

security and stability.  
 ('The Dog' 37)

In Fudge's reading of one of the most renowned films about the affective relationship between dog and human, the dog is both the object and the subject of the story as it attends to the dog's journey back to the home of the human protagonists. Such a dual perspective can also be adopted in the reading of *Quill*. In addition to having the human voiceover (by the daughter of the blind protagonist Mr. Watanabe) narrating the biographical account of the dog in a semi-documentary manner, there is a scene of Quill dreaming of his 'friend', which is actually a teddy bear called 'Pea'. Quill dreams of 'Pea' in a pastel-coloured scene when he is taken away from his 'foster parents' and is sent to the training center. The alienation from the new environment felt by Quill is expressed through dreaming of his familiar friend, suggesting that this film is not taken from the human perspective only, but also highlighting the subjectivity of the dog, although it is possible to interpret this dream scene as an ambivalent rendition of the dog's feeling from the human's point of view. Toward the end of the film, Quill reunites with Pea the old friend right before he has a fatal stroke. This final scene suggests that Quill has never forgotten his past experience, and probably the best moment of his life remains the good old days before he becomes a guide dog. This flashback moment also recalls the Rainbow Bridge at the moment of dying when he is able to see his only friend in the world again.

The 'exaggerated infantilism' (Tuan 102) or excessive traits of immaturity, cuteness, and docility that are most likely to be found in popular representations about pet-animals in East Asian cinemas are interestingly not heavily stressed in this film. Rather, the domestication of Quill as a guide dog is chronicled through his coming to adulthood and physical maturity. The film is divided into sections of separations and reunions experienced by Quill. Similar to his 'ancestor' Hachiko, Quill is characterised by his loyalty, patience, and serenity – human qualities that belong to a perfect adult in Japanese society. Quill's possession of these ideal human qualities perfectly repairs the personality flaws of Mitsuru Watanabe, Quill's blind human companion who is well known among the neighbourhood of his stubbornness, quick-temper, and snobbery. The film devotes a huge proportion of time depicting the ups and downs shared by the blind journalist and the dog, and their process of becoming a perfect 'odd couple' after all the occupational exams and trials. This process is also that of testing the trust and developing a sense of dependence between them, as the disability of the man (his blindness), his obstinate

personality traits, and the inadequacy of the dog (his belated response to linguistic commands and intrinsic unavailability to human language) mark a growing affective linkage between the two. With Quill keeping him company, Watanabe becomes more versatile in his workplace and more considerate, as is shown by his decision to allow Quill to stay indoors instead of keeping him in the tiny kennel outside their house.

After Watanabe has passed away from diabetes, Quill is retired from his ‘occupation’ as a guide dog but ‘works’ instead as an ambassador until he is too old to serve the community. He is sent back to his foster parents’ home until his death. On his deathbed, Quill is well taken care of by the human parents, who express a strong gratitude to him because of his service to the humankind throughout the decade. They whisper to Quill gently: ‘Thank you. It is time to rest.’ With a simple remark announcing the death of Quill by the voiceover, the film ends with a brief final scene when Quill magically transforms into a younger body – he sleeps, instead of dies – in front of the camera. Quill’s return to the infantile body in the cinematic closure not only resonates with the beginning of the narrative arc when he is a cute puppy waiting to be adopted, it also implies that our canine friend is forever regarded a baby who is in need of human care. After having ‘worked’ as a professional guide dog for blind people throughout his lifetime, what is being remembered about Quill is reduced to the image of an untrained puppy whose eyes have not yet opened. The discourse of gratitude and completion of the human through the death of animal companions is sustained by this eternal infantile image of the animal who is always available for our visual and emotional adoption.

### ***This Darling Life* - the dogs who crisscross the personal and the communal**

In Angie Chen’s *This Darling Life*, eight real-life stories of various dogs and their humans set in the city environment of Hong Kong are recorded through an entangling network of interviews and personal reflections of the human interviewees about their terminal situations in front of the camera. These human protagonists come from diverse contexts: a homeless man and his companion dog who both sleep in the street,<sup>5</sup> several private animal shelter owners, founders of different animal welfare parties, rock music singer, housewives, and even the director herself and her brother. In these different stories, we observe the humans sadly bidding farewell to their dogs in solemn Buddhist funerals; we witness the humans indulgently remembering their happy

days with their dearest dogs through revisiting their images in photos; we find the humans and the dogs and cats leading a tough life of inter-dependence in a city that does not provide sufficient civil support; we also see how these humans overcome the grief of loss as the animals' aging physicality, illness, injuries, and deaths are interwoven with their own traumatic stories of illnesses, deaths of their other family members, and troubled relationships with other people.

These human-animal stories share a consciousness of abandonment, guilt, and a heavy sense of responsibility that relates closely to these people's personal backgrounds and family histories. Most of the interviewees openly admit that their compassion for and emotional reliance upon animals come from their incomplete interpersonal relationship with others. As a result, all these humans reflect that they 'learn' various affective qualities through these dogs. They admit that the dogs somehow 'heal' their imperfect personality traits through their enduring survival in the concrete jungle – since there has not been sufficient support for the dogs' inhabitation of the urban environment, with a limited number of parks that allow dogs, regulations in housing estates banning pet-keeping, and the lack of communal support for private animal shelters and medical care for stray animals. Under such challenging ethical conditions in which to sustain inter-species companionship, the interviewees' self-healing process through the inevitable separation from their life-long animal companions has further illustrated an ethical entanglement, or what Haraway describes as 'companion-species worldliness' (88), or the 'flesh of mortal world-making entanglements' (4). In one of the stories, Christine, a divorced woman with emotional problems about her affair with a married man who is cancer-ridden, has to carry her 17-year-old dog Momo in a baby carriage with its pram closed, so that she will not be discovered by the security guards of her residential estate. She exposes all her personal problems in front of the camera by describing her affective bonding with Momo as 'love at first sight', and her 'promise' thereafter to take care of her, which parallels with her unconditional care to the cancer-ridden boyfriend. The physical discomfort and emotional disturbance that cause and are caused by finitude of the beloved ones as a result become the prerequisites for an intersubjective entanglement and affective attachment. Momo passes away in the latter part of the film where we join her funeral, and Christine has to continue her path to take care of her beloved – interspecies affection is not only reciprocal but infinite in this story as while the dog heals the human's emotional suffering, the human can take care of another person's wellbeing. This echoes with Brennan's idea about the impact of social interaction in shaping one's biological

status through the transmission of affect, as she states, '[m]y affect, if it comes across to you, alters your anatomical makeup for good or ill' (74) and vice versa.

All these stories are stitched together by the director's autobiographical account of her relationships with her father and her dog Baby. The parallel account of Angie Chen's intimacy with Baby, who had been with her for 15 years, and her distance from her father, who left his family when the director was young, shows that the film's focus on the animals is set against a problematic and disturbed self-understanding on the part of the filmmaker herself. It might be appropriate to say that the making of this film has a healing function for Chen herself as she had to cope with the triple deaths of her mother, her dog, and her father throughout the years. Before jumping to other interviewees' stories, the film begins by showing that Baby, a Pomeranian, is already 15 years old. Chen's camera captures the shaky movement and watery eyes of the aging dog, juxtaposed with her parents' photos, while she narrates her unhappy childhood. According to her, this unhappy childhood and her pessimistic outlook on life are the result of her father's abandonment of the family. Chen also describes her mother's lonesome life of being both an orphan abandoned by her parents and a single mother abandoned by her husband. The disappointment of this double abandonment makes Chen determined to have Baby stay with her in whatever circumstances.

Toward the end of the film, Baby has passed away. We see Baby's favourite mat and dog bed remaining in Chen's apartment – the camera swipes across the empty domestic space as if it is trying to track the invisible existence of the dog on his favourite mat. Chen also cross-cuts the footage of her father in his sickbed in hospital in this final sequence. In the end, Chen finally forgives her father by trying to empathise with his economic difficulties at that time which prevented his return to Hong Kong for family reunions, as she says: 'I really felt that my dogs taught me about compassion and forgiveness' and 'my dogs taught me that they're completely forgiving.' The healing and grieving process is finally completed as the film comes to an end and the director's sense of guilt is exonerated through accepting, excusing, or in fact, erasing the fault. In Derrida's funeral oration for Levinas, he reiterates Levinas's notion of the responsibility of the Other by referring to the '*entrusted responsibility*' as 'a guilt without fault and without debt' when death is a 'moment of unparalleled emotion' (204, emphasis in original). The animal companions are the perfect mediators to help their humans overcome this guilt-ridden feeling in face of death.

### ***Gu Gu the Cat* – an apologetic healing through anthropomorphism**

In *Gu Gu the Cat*, the sentimental moment of liminality from regret to amnesty, from grief to relief, and from guilt to forgiveness, is also illustrated towards the end of the film. Asako is a manga artist who suffers from writer's block as she is depressed by the death of her 15-year-old cat Ça Va, as well as her diagnosis of ovarian cancer. While she is undergoing treatment in the hospital, Asako dreams of having a conversation with her cat Ça Va, whose death at the beginning of the film is depicted in a brief scene without any emotional outburst. However, the reappearance of the cat in the anthropomorphic form of a young girl in this dream sequence provides a soothing and therapeutic outlet for Asako, whose epiphany has finally overcome her depression at losing the cat when she finally can talk to her cat and the cat can speak back, instead of simply respond to her.

In this dream sequence, Asako confesses her ignorance of the different biological speed of growing and aging between human and pets – that the cat grows old more quickly than she does. She apologises for her human insensitivity to this difference. This poignant revelation sets the sentimental tone of melancholy and grief from the outset and marks the moment of loss an absolutely and regrettably irreversible one. Originally a wilful projection of Asako's regret, the dream turns out to be her healing medicine as well as her moment of epiphany. Such a moment of epiphany is both an emotional recognition of her limited subjectivity and a generative moment of recovery. I call this dream wilful because although Ça Va is an old cat when she passed away, she is represented as a much younger girl than Asako in her confessional dream – this might imply the possibility that Ça Va's aging body is still non-representable in Asako's confined human imagination. Unlike the death of Quill when his human foster parents express their thankful words to him, it is the cat here who expresses her gratitude to the human and even comforts Asako in return. Ça Va told Asako: 'My death and the pain caused by your illness as well as the sadness will all get older. I had a wonderful time, Asako san, thank you.' In fact, this expression of gratitude and words of comfort by the pet animal could be read as a human affection being double-coded in the unconscious projection of a dream for both mourning and self-healing purposes for the depressed and guilt-ridden cancer patient Asako.



This self-comforting and self-healing conversation, followed with a hug between the two females, would suggest that the sentimental, though being an affect triggered by the loss of time and an excessive eruption of emotion, could also lead us a step across the liminality to growing and healing. When Asako wakes up in tears in her sickbed, her situation gradually improves, as her trauma seems to be overcome. The animal-human affective linkage, be it an actually felt and experiential one, or a fantasy of accommodation and endurance, makes us not only acknowledge the limitations of our own perspective, but simultaneously accept that what we can achieve within those limitations is still important and worthwhile. Asako might not be able to prevent herself from weeping or shedding tears, but she can gather the tears after the catharsis and make something out of her uncontrollable emotions. She becomes actively engaged in her therapy as well as welcoming her colleagues' and friends' efforts to cheer her up – which her previously enclosed self would not accept. The excessiveness of the sentimental would interestingly illuminate this self-reflexive moment that defines both agency and an ethical recognition of the other.

In this film, the personal story about Asako's creative deadlock and trauma is equally juxtaposed with an historical narrative of her living environment in episodic fragments throughout the film. The lives of the stray and domesticated cats are tied to the growth of the local neighbourhood, namely the outskirts of Kichijoji's downtown, the Inokashira Park, and the zoo nearby.<sup>6</sup> Narrated by the foreign teacher in the film, who also ambiguously plays the role of Death: 'the people and animals of this town live their own lives, cross paths for an instance and then move on.' The natural landscape of the urban concrete jungle could well be described in this imagery of intersection, chance, and co-existence of multitudes that both draws and dissolves the spatial and affective boundaries across species and time, or what Tuan calls *topophilia* – a neologism that refers to a subtle emotion of 'human being's affective ties with the material environment' (*Topophilia* 93). People enjoy the springtime *hanami*, a traditional Japanese social custom of watching the blossoming sakura with family and friends, while the cats enjoy searching for food in the picnic bags. This remark on the communal intersection echoes with the previous discussion of Asako's recovery as, to quote from Judith Herman's study of trauma victims, 'recovery can take place only within the context of relationship; it cannot occur in isolation' (133). Asako's re-integration with her social network is completed through her healing narrative rendered in her dream with *Ça Va*. The sentimental narration of her dream

encounter with *Ça Va* also highlights the fleeting sense of temporal loss as it can be only expressed subconsciously in a dream form.

### **Conclusion: the incurable popular representations of animals**

In *Dominance and Affection: the Making of Pets*, Tuan Yi-fu's critical discussion of the making of modern pets aptly points out how the aesthetic exploitation or the mistreatment of nature is particularly cruel when it is considered 'playful' or 'cute' nowadays. Although Tuan is referring to an historical trajectory of how some species such as dogs and goldfish have been tamed and crossbred into manageable playthings, his criticism on this oft-neglected adoption of animals for the sake of human pleasure is astoundingly important in pointing out the human fantasy that other animals are always available to human affection. Beyond the daily practices of living together with a few animals who are luckily granted our affection, the veiling of cruelty and domination through affection and care has often been sustained and fortified through the circulation of popular representations. Although these films may have successfully inspired the audience in acknowledging the silent or speechless existence of non-human species in our urban neighbourhood, the interpretive gap between these visual images, the affective narratives, and the actual situation where pet-animals keep being purchased, abandoned, tortured, and euthanised is still there, waiting to be bridged. Maybe we would do best to acknowledge such unbridgeability as a starting point as we keep reminding ourselves of the vulnerable limits of human affection, that we are as domesticated, dominated or 'petrified' (to borrow from Tuan) as our animal companions, so that perhaps while we acknowledge our vulnerability, we actually can never get cured.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The author of this prose poem remains unknown despite its popularity since the 1980s. There have been different versions as well. The current version is cited from Brandes (111). The

popular circulation of this poem in social media has effectively illustrated how the death of the pet animals has illuminated a shared unsettling sense of loss to the humans in the age of global communication.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the limited length of this paper, only three films are selected for detailed discussion. In fact, further survey study should be done on the growing body of works in East Asian cinemas concerning the animal-human relationship in terms of pet culture in general, such as *Cala, My Dog* (2003), *San Hua* (2010), *In Case of Love* (2010), *Twelve Nights* (2013), a number of microfilms (short films that are circulated on social media) produced in Mainland China, and numerous popular Japanese films like *A Tale of Mari and Three Puppies* (2007), *Ten Promises to My Dog* (2008), and *Happy Together: All About My Dog* (2011), among others.

<sup>3</sup> This series of photography can be found on the photographer's website (Akimoto).

<sup>4</sup> For further reading on the life of Hachiko, read Skabelund (87–129). There have been two film adaptations of Hachiko's story - *Hachi-ko* (1987) and *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Different from the other stories, this homeless man is not interviewed in the film. Instead, his story with the dog is recorded through the camera being located at a distance in the street. The observational narration is occasionally cut into the stories of the interviewees throughout the film, so as to maintain a critical distance from other personal narratives by revealing the invisibility of the man and dog, both abandoned in the city. Their episode provides a strong indication about the intersection of class and species which should be further elaborated beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Other than showing the living condition of the stray cats, the film also makes a brief introduction to the elephant Hanako who has been kept captive in the zoo since the end of World War II. Despite the fact that Hanako has shown stereotypic movement disorder through pacing back and forth, the zoo-keeper and other visitors have overseen this abnormal behaviour but keep enjoying their moments with him. This blindness from seeing the suffering animals who are expressing their pain through bodily movement, is an alternative example showing the impossibility to cure the human vulnerability without being able to suffer with the other.

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