

Snuggly Soul Mates

By Yenni Kwok



Madame de Staël, the 18th-century French writer, once declared, “The more I see of men the more I like dogs.” A few hundred years on, the sentiment may resonate even more, as the stresses of modern life can make human contact seem just like more hard work. Cats, dogs and our other beloved animals have become our children, buddies and confidants – all the bonding, some say, without all the emotional ups and downs.

Having been married for two years, Kitty Wan and Brian Chan happily agree that the dark, empty place in their hearts has been filled. It isn't only because they have found one another. It isn't children either – they have none. The 30-year-old Hong Kong couple attributes their domestic bliss to Cyclops and Storm, their beloved pooches.

“They bring us happiness,” says Wan, an accountant. Shortly after they married, she and her IT consultant husband bought Cyclops, a Labrador named after their favorite X-Men superhero. The family later grew with the arrival of Storm, a golden retriever found abandoned on the street by a friend (and christened after an X-Men heroine).

“For us, Cyclops and Storm are everything. They are like our children,” enthuses Wan. Feeling very content, they have decided not to have children. “The dogs can make us happy without giving too much burden financially, physically and psychologically,” she adds.

Wan and her husband walk their dogs every day. A spot in their neighborhood has become a canine playground, a place where “the humans chat while the dogs play,” she remarks. On weekends, they take their pets for an outing, either to a beach, hiking or to a dog swimming pool.

This bonding with canines reflects the changing relationship between people and domestic animals in the modern age. Dogs are no longer kept to guard the house or to hunt animals. Cats are not expected to catch mice anymore. Instead, they are our companions. Many are given names such as Jamie, Anton, Wilma and Leonie, instead of Lady or Butch. No longer relegated to the garage, a doghouse or an alley, they now live in our homes. In some cases, even beds are shared.

“Mona is really our child,” says Chicago librarian Don Widmer, who adopted the adorable mutt with his partner Steve Marciani three years ago. “She gets two lengthy walks each day, one by each of her fathers. We play with her and give her affection. She sleeps in her own plush dog bed at the side of our queen-sized bed. She goes on family outings, visits the grandparents, nieces and nephews.”

“Many people see their pets as family members who deserve the same love, respect and care as the humans in the household,” says Dr. Alison Elizabeth Main, veterinary surgeon at Stanley Veterinary Center in Hong Kong. “It is evident in the amount of veterinary care and other attention people are prepared to provide for their animals.”

Main has observed that more families are coming with their pets for routine health checks. They are also taking pets to grooming salons, not to mention dog-training classes and “puppy play groups.”

The age of Asian pets

While rabbits, hamsters, birds and reptiles have entered our homes, felines and canines remain the top two choices, at least in North America and Europe. Americans own an estimated 69 million cats and 62 million dogs. Germans have 4.7 million dogs and 6.9 million cats, while Britons keep 6.1 million dogs and 7.5 million cats. That is an average of 14 cats and dogs per 100 people in Germany, and 22 in Britain.

The pet craze has also infected Asia. Indeed, on the continent where dog meat is infamous as a delicacy, humane treatment of animals is making inroads. In Thailand, where many dogs are abandoned on the streets, the revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej has set an example by adopting a stray dog, and wrote a best-selling book about his loyal companion.

The pet pooch population in Korea is rising by half a million annually, with owners spending over US\$1.3 billion per year on luxuries for their furry loved ones. In 2004, Beijing boasted at least three million pets, mostly cats and dogs. The epicenter of Asian pet mania is in the grayling

Japan, where the number of pet dogs and cats reaches 19 million, exceeding the number of children under 15.

And, the Japanese pets are pampered in a level unseen in the West. There are mud baths and aromatherapy sessions and sumptuous treats in pet-oriented restaurants. Carmaker Honda has released the W.O.W. (“Wonderful Openhearted Wagon”) concept, which offers a special glove-compartment nest for small bow-wows, as well as seat belts and a larger pop-up crate in the back area for the bigger pooches.

While Europeans and Americans have long showed their affection to animals, the pet phenomena highlights the generational difference in Asia. When Heidi Lee and Esther Chan, both Hong Kongers, brought home their pets, a cat and a dog respectively, their parents were far from delighted. “My parents thought cats were dirty,” recalls Lee, whose father has taken a shine to Cai Cai while her mother has yet to. “The older generation doesn’t like the trouble [of having a pet],” concurs Chan. “The younger generation is different.”

What are the reasons for this trend? Main, the veterinarian, believes it is partly due to growing affluence. “The increase in disposable income means that people are able to give a better quality of life to their pets as well as themselves,” she says. The hectic pace of life in today’s world is also a factor. “There is less time available for potentially demanding human relationships,” she says. “Sometimes it’s nice to just come home, stroke the cat or take the dog for a walk without having to go through emotional or monetary issues.”

Pets can provide a strong sense of companionship to singles, especially those who live far away from home. Lowana Philips, a British expatriate working in Hong Kong, counts her cat Oscar as her best friend. “As I am on my own, I sometimes think of him as a person,” she says. “It is lovely to get home at night and see Oscar. I talk to him and worry about him. I don’t really think of owning or having Oscar, I think of it more as being privileged that he is living with me.”

Pet therapy

Indeed, the companionship of pets has proved to have a therapeutic effect on people, decreasing stress levels, easing owners’ sense of isolation and even lowering blood pressure.

In the past 15 years, medical scientists around the world have agreed upon this. In England, researchers discovered that within a month of

taking a cat or dog into their own, new owners reported a “highly significant” reduction in minor ailments. An increasing number of psychologists and psychiatrists prescribe pet treatment to their patients.

Dr. Rohda Yuen, a counseling psychologist and advisor to the Hong Kong-based Companion Animal Research and Information Centre, occasionally recommends animal companions to her patients, especially youngsters who are only children, the recently bereaved, and parents whose children have left home.

“Animals can help adults and children alleviate their problems,” she says. “They cannot substitute for a human companion, but they can fill in the gap. They respond to our stroking and touching, and it does not take long for people to feel close to animals.”

Meike Petersen of Hamburg, Germany, could relate to that. She got her two cats, Amelie and Loni, one month after her father died four years ago. “They really helped me a lot,” says the 26-year-old. “Especially at night, they were in bed with me and I was never alone. It seemed they could feel my sadness.”

There is little doubt that the axiom “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health” has characterized our relationships with our animal chums. With pets providing friendship and comfort without the hassles and hard work of human interaction, more and more of us may understand Madame de Staël’s famous preference for dogs.

And just as long-married couples are said to grow to look alike, I have seen several pairings of people and pets who share similar looks, facial expressions and body language. What better testimony to the strength of their relationships?

The reportage was published in ‘Modern Life’ pages of Morning Calm, the inflight magazine of Korean Air, September 2006.