Both Pets and Pet Owners as In-between Beings: Is Pet Keeping in Hong Kong Marching towards a Posthuman Cross-Species Relationship?

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Abstract: This anthropological study concerns itself with pet keeping practices in Hong Kong, illuminated by the ethnographic materials collected mainly in 2016. The accounts provided by my informants indicate that they generally regard their pets as family members, and pets are thereby granted a human-like status. In this study, however, I seek to argue that pets are neither animals nor humans; pets are *in-between beings* situated differently on what I coin "the spectrum of in-betweenness," on which "human" and "animal" represent the two ends of the spectrum. That is, some pets are more human-like whilst some are more animal-like. There is a close correlation between the level of such in-betweenness and the level of *animal visibility* of pets. I will postulate a new model for the conceptualisation of animal visibility and for the human affection for pets, pointing out that pets that can be kept both *in sight* and *in site* are, on the whole, more "human." This study also discusses the in-betweenness of pet owners, arguing that the human-pet interaction might serve to challenge the deep-rooted humanist notion that humankind is at the apex of any understanding of the universe; thus pet owners are also neither humans nor animals from a posthumanist perspective. The aforesaid aims of this study are to be achieved through rigorous scrutiny of the habit of naming pets, the interactions between pets and their owners, pet loss bereavement, the politics of household space, cohabitation and training, and the role played by media representations.

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No, my dog used to gaze at me,
paying me the attention I need,
the attention required
to make a vain person like me understand
that, being a dog, he was wasting time,
but, with those eyes so much purer than mine,
he'd keep on gazing at me
with a look that reserved for me alone
all his sweet and shaggy life,
always near me, never troubling me,
and asking nothing.

—PABLO NERUDA, from "A Dog Has Died"

Introduction

A poem entitled "A Dog Has Died," bequeathed to us by Neruda, is perhaps emblematic of how a human-pet relationship can deepen with the passage of time. At first, the distance between the poet and his dog is marked by the aloofness of using "A Dog" in the title. In the first line, the poet writes that "My dog has died"; the status of the dog has changed, indicated by the use of "My dog." Neruda proceeds to talk about his dog being buried in his garden, its actions in the past, his belief in a heaven for his dog, and how his dog used to reserve its attention only for him. The grief cycle Neruda goes through consists of three stages. The expression of sorrow is followed by praise and glorification, and finally by equanimity and solace. Neruda is not alone when it comes to such experience. A similar grief cycle has been experienced by some of my informants, who have considered their pets their own family members. Suffice it to say that by no other beings except humans would the loss of animals be considered that heartbroken.

However, it behooves us to note that the feelings for and treatment of pets are not as consistent as they appear to be. My father was born and raised in a village where the houses nearby— which had lovely views over the open countryside— were fenced only by iron wires. Because of the village's remoteness, every family kept dogs to prevent burglaries. The two named mongrels of my grandma were kept outside in the garden, never allowed to get into the house, and none of her sons and daughters would play with the dogs. As much as I wanted to keep a dog, I never had this desire satisfied. My father holds that dogs are animals, belong to nature, and should not be kept by humans in small kennels. After he moved to a new place when my mother gave birth to me, we visited grandma from time to time when I was a small kid. Interestingly enough, my cousins and I loved to play with the dogs (not the same ones my grandma had kept). We walked them, talked to them, fed them

with snacks, and treated them as human playmates. How do we account for the inconsistencies inherent in our seemingly consistent relationships with pets?

Anthropology and Animal Studies

More than 50 years ago, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss already advocated that animals are "good to think with" (1963, 89). Philosopher Mary Midgley also wrote that "If anthropologists from a strange planet came here to study our intellectual habits and customs, they might notice something rather strange about the way in which we classify the living things on our planet" (1989, 1). These two thinkers have sharply noticed non-human animals (henceforth "animals") being a significant conceptual wellspring that can be tapped to enrich anthropology and to deepen anthropologists' understanding of humans. It is, however, painfully observed that most anthropologists are still slightly hesitant to extend their terrain into human-animal relations. Although some of the seminal anthropological works by, for example, Evans-Pritchard (1950) and Geertz (1973) have provided us with real insights into how animals contribute to a particular social formation, their vim and vigour have mostly been directed to studying animals as objects in "traditional" tribal societies. What if anthropologists started to look at human-animal relations in a postmodern context? What if anthropologists placed a magnifying glass upon bilateral human-animal relations and upon the agency of animals? Would these not be new conceptual shifts adding pizzazz to anthropology?

A discipline crisscrossed also by ethologists, psychologists, geographers, historians, cultural theorists, moral philosophers and sociologists, animal studies focuses on human-animal relations now and in the past in different contexts. To stress the relations between animals and humans has, to some extent, reprised two tensions that have long been observed in human history: the tension between humans and animals, and between culture (human world) and nature (non-human world). But the premiss of my study is that these tensions are, from a posthumanist perspective, false dichotomies. There is no perpetual opposition between humans and animals, nor is there an opposition between culture and nature. All we have is but the delusion that each item in the duos is in eternal contradiction to another because of the arrival of modernity and postmodernity. This is not to say that there are no such beings as humans or animals, because after all, some salient biological features and social classifications of animals have poignantly drawn a line between *us* and *them*, and between "culture" and "nature." But taking account of the concept of *entanglement*— which

Donna Haraway introduces in *When Species Meet* (2008) to describe the situation in which human and nonhuman worlds are indivisible— we should also turn our attention to how humans and other species start to become inextricably interwoven under (post)modernity. In this way, animals that have a close connection to humans become "more human," and humans will, in the meanwhile, become "less human." This study considers that such *in-betweenness* has best manifested itself in human-pet relations.

Pet Keeping as a Cultural Practice

Humans establishing relationships with animals is not a novelty. Archaeological evidence suggests that dogs, a species evolved from wild wolves, originated more than 100,000 years before the present (Vilà *et al*. 1997). And at least about 15,000 years ago, domestic dogs came into existence (DeMello 2012, 150). But as for the pet keeping that we know today, not until the eighteenth century did it finally emerge. Keith Thomas (1996) mentioned three distinctive criteria that define pets. First, pets are given names as are humans. By giving names to pets so that we can use them for terms of reference, pets are separated from wild animals and are admitted into our social world. Second, pets are invited into the human household, granted membership of the human residence, and taken care of by their owners. Third, unlike meat animals, pets are never eaten even though they are edible as their emotional closeness to the household members bestows a human or quasi-human status on them. Besides, DeMello (2012, 148) adds that pets are animals bred purposefully for the sake of humans.

Cross-species relationships are, of course, found not only amongst humans. Some stories in recent news reports shed light on "odd" animal pairings such as terrier and tortoise, and rat snake and dwarf hamster (*New York Times* January 27, 2015). Although these heartwarming episodes show that animals do have the potential to get along, care about, and form attachments for members of other species, they take place usually in an environment where human interventions are involved (Herzog 2014), not to mention that it remains unclear whether those animal pairings are pet keeping or adoption (Herzog 2010a). In point of actual fact, humans are the only species that keep pets; pet keeping as we know today existed relatively recently and is not found in all human societies (DeMello 2012; Herzog 2010b; Herzog 2014). We may feel tempted to ask: *Why do humans keep pets?* In Darwinian parlance, devoting our resources to other species that are fearfully unlikely to help pass on better human genes to the next generation remains incomprehensible at first

glance. Different disciplines as diverse as sociobiology and evolutionary biology have fervently sought to provide explanations for our intimate relationships with other species. Edward O. Wilson (1984) put forth the concept *biophilia* in his eponymous book, stating that humans and other species have a tendency to be drawn towards each other to form a mutually beneficial relationship. Another school of thought argues that humans' care for animals is a by-product of evolution. Archer (2011), for instance, takes a non-adaptionist path and attributes our attachments for pets as a misfiring of parental urges.

Inspiring as these theories and approaches sound, they simply do not suffice to answer the many questions I am to explore in this study. Social and historical changes, as well as cultural differences, have been a reliable testimony to the fact that our love for animals and that for pets are never inborn. The changing patterns of pet keeping across different societies and scads of cases of ill-treatment of pets, indeed, provide useful insights into many a possible way humans treat animals. Studies of pet keeping include, for instance, how pet ownership is shaped by the changing household composition in the United States (Albert & Bulcroft 1988), the roles played by dogs in other communities (Ojoade 1994), and the changes in attitudes towards pets in Western societies (Herzog 2010b; Serpell & Paul 1994). In view of this, my study grounds itself in the argument that pet keeping is a cultural and social practice that varies across different communities rather than a purely biologically determined result. To narrow down the research scope, we can see that even within a society, the attitude towards the same kind of pets can vary considerably. Whereas amongst my informants, those who keep cats and dogs unanimously claimed that they treated their pets as family members and would never abandon them, in a survey conducted by the CSD (2011), 11,200 cat-keeping and dog-keeping households in Hong Kong had, in stark contrast, considered abandoning their pets.

To justify the consumption or exploitation of a particular kind of animals, we usually need to first (re)define those animals by using linguistic cover-ups to shield ourselves from moral and ethical implications. Interesting here is that whereas we define some animals as "meat animals" or "laboratory animals" to avoid being prosecuted by our own conscience (though some people do not seem to have that problem), we define pets as "family members," thus taking on more moral responsibility for their well-being. Nevertheless, if we put this pets-are-my-family-members discourse under critical scrutiny, some glaring inconsistencies would be spotted. That is, we sometimes treat our family members rather unfairly and harshly. Parents having more than one child very often show favouritism

toward one child over another. And children oftentimes abuse their parents' love. Even more paradoxically, there are things that we are not supposed to do to our family but we astonishingly do those things to our pets. We do not fasten our family members' necks with collars, nor do we cage them like some of us do to dogs. If family relationships raise a distinct possibility of them being loaded with unequal power relations, we might also feel compelled to ask: Could those unequal power relations be found as well in human-pet relations? Is calling our pets "family members" just a linguistic illusion deployed to whitewash the blatant fact that lurking behind such a grandiose façade of *prima facie* posthuman cross-species relationships is an all-too-platitudinous remake of human self-aggrandisement, through which humans emerge as─ as they have long been─ the only subjects?

In the first part "Disappearance and Reappearance of Animals," this study gives a social and historical context. Although the ethnographic materials collected are Hong Kong-based, the pet owners' attitudes to their pets and the pet-keeping practices nonetheless have their roots in the social and historical transformation from modernity to postmodernity in twentieth-century Europe. When charting the transformation, I particularly highlight the visual encounters between animals and humans to demonstrate how visibility played a pivotal role in pulling, in both the material and emotional sense, humans and animals together; thus, both parties started to carry a tinge of in-betweenness.

The second part "Theoretical Framework and Methodology" is a discussion of the theories and methodological toolkits adopted. After pointing out the shortcomings of some previous theories, I argue that pets are not animals or humans, but in-between beings situated on what I coin "the spectrum of in-betweenness," on which "human" and "animal" represent the two ends of the spectrum respectively. That is, some pets are more human-like whilst some are more animal-like. There is a close correlation between the level of such in-betweenness and the level of *animal visibility* of pets. I will postulate a new model for the conceptualisation of animal visibility and for the human affection for pets, pointing out that pets that can be kept both *in sight* and *in site* are, in the main, more "human." Then, I discuss the in-betweenness of pet owners, arguing that the human-pet interaction might serve to challenge the deep-rooted humanist notion that humankind is at the apex of any understanding of the universe; pet owners therefore are also neither humans nor animals from a posthumanist perspective.

The third part "All Pets Are Family Members but Some Are "Special" looks into the

animal visibility of different types of pets in terms of three aspects─ the habit of naming pets, the interactions between pets and their owners, and how the owners deal with pet loss. I will examine how animal visibility plays a pivotal role in shaping our treatment of pets.

The fourth part "Marching towards Posthumanism?" aims to discuss such issues as the politics of household space, cohabitation and training, and the role played by media representations. These issues are raised with recourse from posthumanism to examine, if not question the old and rigid academic notion that pets are merely in captivity and are deprived of their agency.

Disappearance and Reappearance of Animals

How do we account for the human affection for pets and for the searing humanistic attitude to animals in the twentieth century? How do we theorise these phenomena? One of the etymological roots of "theory" is the Latin word *theōria*, which means "to look at." The theorisation of these phenomena requires us to look at how and why humans looked at animals in the past, whereby we can see that pet keeping is not simply a personal habit, nor is the popularity of our humanitarian attitude to animals nowadays a passing fad. Instead, they are legacies which have their roots in a long period of social and historical gestation. This part focuses on the changes in human-animal relations in twentieth-century Europe, and on pets and modern culture in Europe. This is, of course, not to say that there was a complete absence of pet keeping or any humane movement before 1900, because after all, every transformation is a successor of a multitude of previous historical events and does not take place abruptly. Yet, the arrivals of modernity and postmodernity in the twentieth century, I seek to demonstrate, have acted as catalysts that further fanned the humanitarian attitudes to animals[2]. Such catalysts are the reason why pet keeping in urbanised areas today possesses a set of *sui generis* characteristics that distinguish it from other tribal pet-keeping cultures documented by legion anthropological accounts[3].

From Modernity to Postmodernity

[2] For the sake of brevity and clarity, this study does not detail all the social and historical transformations, however significant they are. For more information about the human-animal relationships and changes in human attitudes towards animals in Europe before the twentieth century, see, for example, Ritvo (1987; 1994), Serpell and Paul (1994), Tester (1992) and Thomas (1996).

[3] Some of these riveting tribal pet-keeping cultures have been detailed, for example, by Basso (1973) and Cormier (2003, Chapter 6).

In his *Animal and Modern Cultures* (1999), sociologist Adrian Franklin deftly demonstrates how social and economic changes in the twentieth century have engendered new forms of relationships humans have with animals. Human concern for animals started to sprout under modernity and Fordism (1900s to 1960s), and was intensified by postmodernity and post-Fordism (from the 1970s onward).

Although Fordism does not equal modernity, they both celebrate three values: enlightenment, progress and emancipation. When the first motorised car brought by Henry Ford in 1896 appeared on the horizon, carriages were effaced one by one from the horizon. Horses started to disappear not only from the horizon, but also from human horizons, thus leaving humans a sense of nostalgia for animals. More to the point, Ford's introduction of the assembly line, because of which each worker was only responsible for a small part of the whole production process, also transformed the whole economic structure by facilitating mass production and giving birth to a new form of capitalism. Such capitalism involved moral workers giving up their autonomy in mass-production factories, but they were compensated by high wages and cheap goods. Thanks to the steady increase in wages, high levels of consumption were gradually achieved in most social classes, which eventually led to new forms of modern leisure activities like pet keeping, hunting, angling, bird-watching, bushwalking─ activities that sought to re-link humans to the long-lost "wild animals." In so doing, animals became visible to humans again. Such visibility was further escalated by representations of animals in cartoons, children stories, films, novels, and animal documentaries. Having said that, in the age of modernity most of the interactions *per se* were anthropocentric, for animals in most cases served mostly the purpose of entertaining humans.

From the 1970s onward, a tremendous change took place as the anthropocentric attitudes towards animals started to transform into a yearning for deeper relations with animals and nature. This yearning can be seen in humans' care for the well-being of animals. The major rationale for such changes can be attributed to the collapse of the post-war economy; to the old path of modernity having failed to deal with new issues, values and socialities; and to some young people began to address questions with other alternatives to achieve economic and political success without destroying the environment. In short, all these social and economic changes led people to re-think the way to accommodate animals in the changing global economy. Such an "epiphany" resulted, to name just a few, in re-building "nature" by setting up urban nature reserves, wooded areas and other habitats; in

care for the well-being of animals; in TV programmes, videos, and documentaries stressing the interconnection between humans and animals; in using the term "companion animals" to get rid of the entertainment value attached to animals; in changing hunting practices; and in dropping consumption of meat and in the growing popularity of vegetarianism. All these practices, by making animals more visible, further bestowed moral identity upon animals─ that is, animals became more human-like.

Postmodernity having generated not a few seemingly positive human-animal relationships, they also gave rise to three postmodern phenomena, *viz.*, misanthropy, ontological insecurity, and risk-reflexivity (Franklin 1999, 54-59). First, for *misanthropy*, though not a preserve of postmodernity, was compounded as a result of the more obvious degradation of environment. The environmental problems brought by modernity were tolerable back then since they were considered a *quid pro quo* for the overall affluence brought to all social strata. But in the age when all that was solid melted into air, under postmodernity, mass unemployment and new profit-hungry businesses made these environmental problems even more pressing and inexcusable. Deeply dismayed, some hoped to bring humans back to the "bright side" by establishing a closer connection to animals─ a signifier of purity and goodness. *Ontological insecurity* mainly stemmed from the self being no longer confined to a fixed cultural set because of the changing nature of postmodernity. Postmodernity is a time when strong interpersonal commitments starts to crumble down; when strong bonding that held the family together fades; when workers' devotion to the company withers; and when social identity is fragmented potentially. Accordingly, the love of animals supersedes that of humans, for the former is deemed more unconditional and enduring. Under postmodernity, the number of companion animals, in particular dogs and cats, ballooned in Britain (Council for Science and Society 1988). With regards to *risk-reflexivity*, it is observed that prior to the 1970s, spaces were separated in a relatively clear-cut way. But what came to the fore from then onward was the urban encroachment that has thinned out the lines of demarcation between urban areas, intermediate development areas, and marginal and wild areas. The lives of animals have been disturbed, and serious pollution have propelled humans into shouldering more moral responsibility, for the future of animals is now neatly tied to humankind.

Pets and Modern Culture

After sketching a rough social and historical contour of the increasingly tightly

knitted relationships between humans and animals, we should take note of the fact that human-pet relationships do warrant further discussion. As Franklin (1999) puts it succinctly, "The relationship with pets is the closest and most humanised of human-animal relations, and the changing nature of pet keeping can be related to important social and cultural transformations in modernity" (84). Such a relationship, as we shall see, has become more common due to ontological insecurity. To be more specific, it was fanned by the emergence of market individualism; by changes in labour market, and thus the stability of the single-wage family; by instability of marriage; and by the hesitancy of having offspring. When all these factors are added together, we may then be able to understand that in human-pet relations, it is not simply the animals being anthropomorphised, but that the human-animal boundary itself is starting to blur in a posthuman way. It is by no means a coincidence to see an abundance of books that come with the titles like *Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell, and Know* (Horowitz 2009) and *Reaching the Animal Mind: Clicker Training and What It Teaches Us about All Animals* (Pryor 2009). Books of this ilk seem to further corroborate the fact that it is not uncommon for pet owners to try to understand the needs of animals wholeheartedly and to fervently seek for a certain kind of mutuality with their pets.

The drastic change in pet-keeping attitudes has been manifested in a number of aspects (Franklin 1999, 89-103). First, in Britain, the USA, Australia, and Japan, there was a huge increase in pet ownership. More people would like to spend on their pets, thus leading to a booming in pet industries. Second, there have been more and more products and services targeted at pets. These include pet health products, pet psychologists, pet clothing, pooch playschools, and even pet mortuary industries. Third, from the 1970s onward, the concept of companionability has been emphasised, which means pets are considered real companions instead of playthings or ornaments. This can be seen in the choice of breeds. Fourth, compared to the 1960s when pet keeping was regarded merely as a hobby, its cultural and social significance has been burgeoning as it now provides the pet owners with many social benefits that society can no longer offer. Also, pets play an influential role in constructing self-identity in terms of the lifestyles of their keepers. This can be reflected in, for example, the types of pets one chooses and the dog's breed. Lastly, the therapeutic values of keeping pets has garnered increasing medical and scientific attention due mostly to the rising stress levels and other illnesses, both mental and physical, associated with the postmodern condition.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

It all starts with looking. In his *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), Jacques Derrida writes, "An animal looks at us and we are naked before it. Thinking, perhaps, begins there" (29). These two lines are so beauteously yet elusively written they already transcend my power of description. When does this animal look at us? What is this thinking that has never been thought of before? What is the nakedness that the animal's looking gives us? If stripping a human naked is the most effective way to humiliate him/her, how do we react to such nakedness? Furthermore, a question of overriding importance garners our attention: *Is that animal really looking at us?* Suffice it to say that looking back at a human who is looking at us marks the start of a relationship. But what if we are within the field of the animal's vision but are never the focus of its looking? This study, by using the concept of *animal visibility*, concerns itself with the in-betweenness of and closeness between pets and their owners. My central argument is that animal visibility— the very foundation on which human-pet relations build— has a positive correlation with both the level of in-betweenness and the pet owners' treatment of their pets.

In-betweenness and Posthumanism

For centuries, the Western philosophy tradition has been infested with dichotomies— good and evil, male and female, real and imaginary et cetera. Of them, the separation of humans and animals is one eloquently spoken and profusely written for astonishingly long. This dualism is still widely held today probably because the way humans live is considered "culture," whereas the way animals live belongs to "nature." But a litany of scientific research has shed light on the fact that many anthropoid apes— the relatives of *Homo sapiens*— have demonstrated remarkable skills of using tools (Baber 2003, Chapter 3). Even for distant species like male bowerbirds, it is found that they possess the intelligence to use small objects and baubles to design some optical illusion when wooing female birds (*New York Times* January 23, 2012). All these jaw-dropping episodes that "nature" shows us seem to suggest that biological differences are too implausible an argument to adopt. The dualism of "humans" and "animals," to me, is not so much exhaustive grouping as cultural and social categorisations. Since Aristotle, man has been differentiated from (wild) animals and considered "rational animals." When Descartes came with his notorious mind-and-body

dualism, one of the implications was that the body stood only for the laws of physics; therefore, the animal, being soulless, was simply "a machine from which the ghost is absent." However, if human beings are distinguished only by what Francis Fukuyama (2002, 171) calls— "Factor X," an assemblage of sociability, language, reason, emotions, moral choice, consciousness etc, it is not surprising that humans secure the superiority over animals. But we might find it more appropriate to jettison such re-furnishment of the human-centred attitude in light of the closeness between humans and animals brought by modernity and postmodernity. The close relationships humans have with animals have prompted us to take account of the fact that some in-between categories have emerged. Amongst many of these categories, pet keeping is a shining example.

Throwing a sidelong glance at a huge body of recent literature on human-pet relations, I am slightly troubled by a plethora of attention having been directed to the physical, psychological and educational benefits that humans can reap from keeping pets. Allen (2003) states that those who have pets as supportive companions in their lives tend to enjoy cardiovascular benefits. Heyworth *et al*. (2006) conclude that children in South Australia living with dogs or cats leads to lower risk of having gastroenteritis. Large-scale national surveys conducted by Headey and Grabka (2007) show that people who own a pet in German and Australia are the healthiest compared to those who never had one or cease to have one. Regarding the psychological benefits, family pets, in particular dogs and cats, are said to be able to contribute emotionally and socially to people undergoing stressful phrases— such as divorce, loneliness, bereavement— of their life cycle (Krause-Parello *et al*. 2014; Sable 1995; Walsh 2009). Also, the use of pets in classroom has been advocated to emotionally comfort children of all ages (Meadan & Jegatheesan 2010).

Though the above-mentioned studies were carried out using so-called scientific means, my study has no intention to ground its roots in them, due partly to the fact that studies focusing on such issues do generate inconsistent findings. Studies done by Rijken and van Beek (2011), Wells (2009), and Wright *et al*. (2007) show that there is no certain correlation between pet-ownership and pet-owners' health. Most reasons for such inconsistencies can generally be attributed to methodological flaws (For reviews, see Herzog 2010b; 2011). I opine that those anthropocentric studies— which concentrate on the pet-keeping benefits that human can "abuse"— have reduced the fecundity of human-pet relations to only a time-worn utilitarian parlance, and for certain can tell us so little about the subtler power relations and interactions.

For the sake of a deeper analysis, my study would first place the research lens upon the in-betweenness of pets. The idea that pets are considered non-animals is not uncommon. Anthropologists as diverse as Edmund Leach (1964) and Marshall Sahlins (1976) already proposed that pets are an intermediate category between nature and culture. But another saying which is most cited is perhaps what Deleuze and Guattari have written: "[A]nyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool" (1987, 240). This bold saying is grounded in the thinking that pets are individuated so much they, in a strict sense, are not animals but beings created by humans to mirror the image of themselves they would love to see. Another reason why pets are not regarded as "real" animals, as John Berger points out, is that they have been deprived nearly of all other animal contact, artificially fed, confined to a certain if not limited space for exercise, or sometimes sterilised (1980, 14). These changes have eventually made pets come to resemble their owners. Another form of human dominance over pets includes making pets vulnerable (say, smaller and more docile) through breeding and genetic manipulation so that the pets have no other alternatives but to rely utterly upon their owners (Berger 1980, 15). Erica Fudge (2002b) even goes one step further, saying pets are both animals and humans. She questions that a pet can never "talk back," or even if it does, it can attract punishment from the owners. The breakdown in communication would result in the owner projecting his/her mental state onto the pet, hoping s/he[4] would be able to fathom the message correctly. That is why Fudge concludes: "[A pet] is an animal─ it cannot speak─ but it is also an ideal human─ it says what we want it to say" (2002b, 33).

These great thinkers fiercely oppose pet-keeping due to the unbalanced power relation. As much as I deeply appreciate their contributions, many of their discourses seem to be a reiteration of pet owners' exercising complete control over their pets, which I consider inappropriate in two aspects. Let me now explicate. First, it is a grave mistake to universalise difference. Although pet-keeping cultures in different urban areas across the world are, to a large extent, shaped by modernity and postmodernity, we should also be aware that, as a cultural practice, pet-keeping in one society must carry some nuances that make it slightly different from the pet-keeping culture in another society. Second, those thinkers seem too self-absorbed that they understate the subjectivity of pets, nor have they pondered over the relationships from a posthumanist perspective. At first glance, pets may have lost much of their agency when being taken care of by humans, but my study seeks to explore also the possibility that pets may have benefited from the companionship. This is

[4] To eschew writing "s/he" or "his/her" awkwardly, this study uses masculine pronouns to stand for both anonymous males and anonymous females.

not to say that pets are never mistreated by their owners, because after all, pets are *ab initio* in a state of captivity. But pets are frequently addressed as "companion animals" for a reason, because humans choose to live with them not for utility but for the sake of forming companionship/ partnership (DeMello 2012, 154; Fudge 2002b, 31). Taking account of the role played by pet owners, I find the ways people cope with their pets may have provided "contact zones" (Haraway 2008) through which both pets and their owners are able to locate something they mutually enjoy and a common medium to communicate, instead of only humans themselves exercising overwhelming power over pets.

Animal Visibility and "The Spectrum of In-betweenness"

Both pets and pet owners being in-between beings has begged a question: What determines the degree of such in-betweenness? The fact that "thinking," as Derrida writes, begins when the animal looks at us might have dropped a subtle hint as to the importance of looking and being looked. Of all the human senses, vision was placed at the apex by Plato. It would be my remiss had I failed to mention John Berger's "Why Look at Animals?" (1980), in which he— by adducing such concepts as looking, being looked, and spectacle— has re-stated the unequal power relation in which humans remain as subjects and animals as objects. Be that as it may, these visual notions, such as looking, gazing and seeing, in my not-so-humble opinion, have confined themselves again to another dichotomy known as dominant subject and passive object. In my study, I will discuss beyond the framework of looking and being looked by introducing the significance of *visibility*. The word "visibility," with its prefix "vis," has probably duped many of us into focusing solely upon the visual encounters. But it, in fact, comprises more than that.

O'Sullivan, in her *Animals, Equality and Democracy* (2011), argues that the notion of all animals being equal is quite a reverie. To her, the animal protection movement has recently been stagnant precisely because it remains ignorant about "internal inconsistency." Whereas "external inconsistency" involves treating humans and non-humans differently, "internal inconsistency" refers to different treatment to the same species under seemingly different yet in fact morally equivalent circumstances. A brilliant example at her hand is that most people accept scientific experiments being done on laboratory animals rather than on their children's pets. Internal inconsistency, she opines, arises from the different degrees of visibility linked to the cultural and social classifications of animals and to their use in the eyes of humans. The different degrees of visibility, thereby, result in different kinds of

treatment to animals. Basically, the more visible, the better the treatment. Although her credentials as an expert in public policy are not to be impugned, the conclusion she draws is rather problematic. Time and time again, alas, cruel treatment is still observed on animals that are highly "visible." Captured dolphins in aquariums, which are highly visible and of huge social significance to humans, are, ironically, those that suffer more from captivity and stressful training designed to entertain naïve human spectators. Also, O'Sullivan fails to notice that the treatment of the same species can still vary under similar circumstances. Pet keeping practices, as an illustration of the point, self-evidently contradict her conclusion, to which I will return in the next part.

In order to fathom the correlation between animal visibility and the treatment of pets, a new model is required for conceptualisation. But prior to the discussion, we need to understand that visibility should be comprehended as something that surpasses mere dichotomies between subject and object, as well as between the seeing and the being seen. Surely, visibility itself is closely related to the relationships between the seeing and the being seen. But there is an additional question stemming from this concept which begs deliberate discussion. That is, *what determines the level of visibility?* Visibility can both empower and disempower, and can determine both subjects and objects. I seek, in my study, to look not only into the visual encounters, but also into the non-visual factors that affect such encounters and thus human-pet relations.

Here, I argue that pets are in-between beings situated on what I coin "the spectrum of in-betweenness," on which "human" and "animal" are respectively placed at the two opposite ends. Some pets are more close to the "human" side, whereas some to the "animal" side. The determining factor is the different levels of visibility. I should hasten to point out that pets that are more close to the "human" side are pets that can be kept both *in sight* and *in site.* To be in sight is to be seen easily; to be in site is to be seen in the right place and in the right way. The former stresses the visual encounters between pets and owners; the latter places emphasis on the interaction, both physical and mental, between pets and their owners. When using this sight-and-site model to analyse human-pet relations, I will take account of a basket of factors including the biological differences between different kinds of pets, the interaction between owners and pets (though such interaction is also moulded by the biological constraint of the pets), the social and cultural meanings bestowed on pets by their owners, and also the owners' personal experiences.

Ethnographic Methods and Researcher's Position

Many of my ethnographic materials were collected from semi-structured interviews with some Hong Kong pet owners done from December 2015 to June 2016. As a member of the pet-keeping tribe many years ago, I too, have kept some goldfish and swordtail fish for around two years. When my last swordtail fish died, I buried the body under an orchid tree and decided to not keep any pets again. My experiences have equipped me with the pet-keeping knowledge that enables me to engage in conversation with my informants effectively. All the 15 informants were personally known to me, the researcher, for at least two years, which not only saved much time on rapport-building, but also facilitated the interviews to take place in a rather relaxing ambience. In order to exhaust as many possibilities as I could, I planned in advance to handpick informants who have (had) experience in keeping pets other than dogs and cats. The fruitfulness of this study lies in the variety of pets my informants have kept: dogs, cats, hamsters, parrots, pigeons, mynahs, terrapins, turtles, freshwater fish, saltwater fish, and prawns. Although the pets might be taken care of by all the family members of my informants, I only interviewed the ones who spend most of the time on the pets, for these informants come to know the pets way better and can recount more insightful experiences. All the interviews— each of which was 45 minutes to one and a half hours in duration— were conducted in Cantonese and then transcribed in English. Fully aware of the possible loss of meaning in this Cantonese-to-English translation, I would put the original Cantonese/Chinese word in brackets after the English one in the informants' accounts when I feel it necessary. Very often, the questions I asked would touch upon such sensitive issues as pet loss and owners' control over their pets, I therefore first prepared some easy-to-answer factual questions for every informant and let him freely recount the pet-keeping experiences in chronological order. Those sensitive issues (though some informants did not consider that sensitive) were brought on at the end of every interview.

Having received formal training in anthropological field methods when I was an undergraduate, I also based my ethnographic data on carrying out participant observation. Despite the interviews being conducted in five months' time, the brevity of which is compensated by the frequent visits I have paid to the informants' residences over the past few years. I sought to observe how they had strived to build a connection with their pets. Such effort would be directed to, for example, the use of anthropomorphism, which ranges from the simple projection of human experience onto other species to serious attempts to

understand animals in their shoes through intimate familiarity.

I am aware of my position in the research as a vegetarian. I have no intention of concealing the fact that this experience is attributed to my strong personal stance on certain animal-related issues. There is always a risk that a researcher's personal experiences would cloud his/her judgments or lead him to design, either consciously or unconsciously, misleading questions in the hope of generating findings that would only further his viewpoint. However, as an experienced interviewer, I consider my personal experiences not as a drawback but an advantage to provide me with the academic exuberance to carry out solid research. In this study, as a researcher, I aim to draw overwhelmingly extensively on my informants' accounts than on my own viewpoint on pet-keeping.

All Pets are Family Members but Some are "Special"

Pet-Keeping in Hong Kong

Whilst there has been a slew of literature upon human-animal relations in the west, academic studies upon animals and pet-keeping cultures in Hong Kong are few and far between, not surprisingly. This is true about her pet ownership situation and pet industry as much as it is true about her animal welfare legislation. To depict the panorama requires gleaning bits and pieces from scarce Hong Kong government documents, law reviews, figures collected by animal welfare organizations, and sometimes news articles. Demanding as this task seems, we are still able to sketch a rough landscape of Hong Kong's situation, which helps us to acquire some basic knowledge about pet-keeping in Hong Kong. Whilst we have observed a huge increase in Hong Kong population over a half century ago[5], pet-keeping in Hong Kong has at the same time become increasingly popular, although there is only a handful of official data recounting the trend. According to the figures provided by the CSD (2006; 2011), it is estimated that some 286,300 Hong Kong households were keeping pets in 2005, which represented 12.6% of the total population in Hong Kong. In 2010, there were an estimated 249,400 households keeping dogs/ cats, representing 10.6% of all households in Hong Kong. Though the overall number of pet-keeping households has slightly dropped, it should be noted that the numbers of pet dogs and cats have indeed risen

[5] According to statistics provided by the CSD (2012; 2015), we observe a rising trend in Hong Kong's population. Hong Kong's population in 2014 is more than twice as much as that of 1961. The Hong Kong population in 1961 was about 3.13 million, and in 2014, there were already 7,152,000 people.

considerably. In 2005, there were 197,900 pet dogs and 99,200 pet cats in Hong Kong. But in 2010, there were a recorded 247,500 dogs and 167,600 cats kept by households. Meanwhile, a worrying trend is also observed. In 2010, of the 249,400 households that keep dogs and/or cats, around 4.5% have considered not to keep their pets. Amongst this 4.5%, 39% of them gave the reason that they had no intention to look after pets that become too old, sick, and lost hair. A review of animal welfare legislation conducted by Whitfort and Woodhouse (2010, 145-149) attributes Hong Kong having a huge population of feral cats and dogs partly to pet owners abandoning their pets. Even more worrying, between 2007 and 2010, most Hong Kong stray or feral cats and dogs captured by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) were euthanised.

So far, it would seem, these figures have reflected how the ill-treatment of animals and pets in Hong Kong has led to a growing sense of social unease, but I at times am assailed by doubts. These figures simply engender a few more vexed questions: What causes such an egregious problem? Can the situation of all Hong Kong pet-keeping households be generalised from these figures? To get a more accurate picture, there is a pressing need to understand the subtle politics and power relations within a pet owner's household, in minute detail, with the ethnographic materials I collected. Then, and only then, can we produce a more in-depth analysis of human-pet relations in Hong Kong.

Pets as Asexual Children

It is more than common to see pet owners define their pets as family members (DeMello 2010, 4). Pets are part of the family not only in the literal sense that they share the same roof with us, but also in the emotional sense that they are loved so deeply by us we are willing to pamper them with nourishing food, sumptuous clothing, delicate toys, and beauty treatments done in classy salons. All the informants told me that they treated their pets as family members. The word "treat" also tells us they fully know pets are not their family members, but they still choose to care for them with all their heart and soul. Yet that said, family members come in many forms. To all my informants, pets were *children*. It is by no means surprising to have these similar findings reported, because after all, the term "pet"─ suggested by DeMello (2012, 149) that it probably derived from the French word *petit* (which means "little")─ meant "spoiled child" in the fifteenth century.

Of course, the origins of a word do not necessarily mean the word would carry its original meaning all the way down to different cultures. A more compelling explanation is

that pets have to be treated as children in order to be constantly looked after, fed, and protected from the "dangerous" outside world. Domestication takes place by humans generally looking for the juveniles that possess certain traits such as curiosity and being submissive. The Darwinian magic herein puts the "selective pressure" on those who possess these traits, and in so doing, domesticated animals have become dependent on humans so much they are in a state of being forever juvenile, that is, a physiological condition know as *neoteny*. Suffice it to say that the domesticated animals are the "dumb" versions of their forebears[6]. However, during domestication, the physical traits the juveniles possess─ such as smaller teeth, rounder faces and chubbiness─ are also selected. Bradshaw and Paul (2010) summarise a set of infant-like facial features that can be termed "cuteness," saying that "cute" animals attract more human empathy (consider our intense love for dewy-eyed puppies and round-faced kittens) since this is a by-product of human evolution. Although I remain highly sceptical of "cuteness" being a necessary condition for keeping pets (especially those "cute" facial features are sometimes extraneous to many keeping "exotic" pets), it nonetheless can partially explain why my informants tend to consider dogs and cats more human-like. Burghardt and Herzog (1989) have found that compared to reptiles, fish or other invertebrates, mammals are considered more human-like. Similarly, my research found that, although all the informants address their pets as their own children, dogs and cats are positioned closer to the "human" side on the spectrum of in-betweenness, and are considered more "human" compared to avian species and reptiles. Fish, not surprisingly, are placed nearly at the opposite end of the spectrum. Max, a 26-year-old student who kept around ten angelfish, blood parrot cichlids and velvet cichlids, implied in the opening conversation we had that pet fish were unlike other kinds of pets:

> *Interviewer:* Thanks for coming.
> *Informant:* Thanks for having me. So what's your research exactly about?
> *Interviewer:* It's about people keeping pets in Hong Kong. To be precise, I study the way pet owners establish relationships with their pets.
> *Informant:* But I only keep tropical fish. Do they count as pets?

The fact that fish are considered different from pet dogs and pet cats, or considered not as

[6] For instance, adult dogs would generally beg for food, lick and greet their human owners. These are behaviour commonly found in wolf puppies. Behaviour aside, physical traits such as floppy ears are found in wolf puppies and many adult dog breeds (see Cohn 1997).

pets, is further corroborated by the way Cindy─ a 27-year-old PhD candidate who keeps eight zebrafish (trade name zebra danio)─ recounted her experience of dealing with her fish when she needed to move into a new flat: "Fish aren't pets. …I mean fish aren't pets in the traditional sense like cats and dogs. To say harshly, even if I flush them down the toilet [before moving into my new flat], theoretically speaking… I could have done so if I want to shun the responsibility. But I also understand that I can't leave them behind [in my old flat]."

Pets being treated as children can also be observed through the naming of pets by my informants. In the table below, some pets and their names are provided. It is known that giving a pet a name is to grant it a status of a human individual (Fudge 2002b, 31). Only in this way can partnerships be formed. When naming their pets, however, the owners tended to choose names that carry a tinge of childishness, notwithstanding the fact that some of the pets are technically and biologically adults if we take the human equivalent of the pets' ages into consideration.

Owner	Pet and Breed	Age of the Pet	Name of the Pet
Anne	♦ male mongrel	♦ 10 years old	♦ 小 Q (which means "little Q")
Carmen	♦ three Chinese stripe-necked turtles (unknown sexes)	♦ 7 years old; ♦ 7 years old; ♦ 5 years old	♦ All of them are called "龜龜" (which means "turtle turtle" or "little turtle")
Cherry	♦ male American Shorthair	♦ 8 years old	♦ 黑 me 蚊 (which means "super dark")
Dorothy	♦ male Bichon Frisé	♦ 3.5 years old	♦ White B (which means "baby in white")
Eliot	♦ African grey parrot (unknown sex)	♦ around 10 years old	♦ 雀仔 (which means "little bird")
Mark	♦ female cockatiel ♦ a pair of lovebird couple	♦ 6 years old ♦ both are around 5 years old	♦ 雀仔 (which means "little bird") ♦ the male is called "花仔" (which means "flower kid"); the female is called "花女" ("flower girl")
Vanessa	♦ female Exotic Shorthair	♦ 7 months old	♦ 灰仔 (which means "little grey")
Yan	♦ male Yorkshire Terrier	♦ 11 years old	♦ 芝麻 (which means "sesame")

Table 1. The habit of naming pets

I do not evince any surprise at seeing that all the fish kept by my informants were never given names. That is, they are the *nameless* children and of lower social and familial significance. From the way the informants named their pets, we have come also to notice that scant attention has been paid to the sex of the pet. Helen, a 22-year-old student, named her male English Cocker Spaniel "Nicole," a name reserved for human females. With regards to the sexes of pets, my ethnographic data bifurcate into two distinct patterns. First, the pet owners of fish, reptiles and avian species generally have no idea whether their pets are male or female, and they never bother to figure out[7]. Second, the pet owners of dogs and cats do not care much about the sex issue even though they have a clear concept in mind whether their pets are male or female. Again, this interesting phenomenon is related to the sexual ambiguity of human progeny. Children are considered asexual in most cases since they do not show clear sexual preference for any gender until puberty hits them hard with physical and psychological changes. And because children generally carry this "undefined" feature, they signify such noble qualities as innocence, curiosity, and purity. The status of perpetual immaturity further turns pets as beings that are for ever in need of constant care and protection in a way human children do.

From naming habits, the child-like status, and the asexual feature of pets, we have found that despite all the pets being treated as children by my informants, pets are positioned very differently on the spectrum of in-betweenness. Fish, amphibians, reptiles, and avian species are given a slightly lower status and are closer to the "animal" side, whereas above them come the most human-like pets─ dogs and cats. Positioned, as cats and dogs are, more to the "human" side on the spectrum, they secure their owners' love and solicitude reserved for human offspring. Vanessa, a 27-year-old newly married woman who adopted a female Exotic Shorthair a few months before the wedding, related to me the reason why she cancelled her honeymoon, not afraid of infuriating her husband: "We [she and her husband] originally agreed to spend our honeymoon in Thailand. But she's just 7 months old! How can I leave her at home and travel to Thailand selfishly? She's my adorable baby! I won't let others take care of her and I'm not going anywhere." Even if the informants are determined to leave Hong Kong, they will ensure that their pets are well taken care of by people whom they trust. Yan, a 29-year-old office lady who keeps an 11-year-old male Yorkshire Terrier, described the arrangements she usually makes when she

[7] Cockatiels and lovebirds are exceptions in my study, for the sex of a bird of such species can be distinguished with relative ease by the colours of the feathers.

has left for other countries: “If we go traveling only for two to three days, we will leave the dog at home, and ask our relatives to feed him every day. But if we left for more than a week, we would send him to a pet hotel. Both the staff members of the hotel and my relatives would send us photos and videos of my dog every day, to inform us about his condition.” Likewise, Cherry, a 32-year-old English tutor who owns an 8-year-old male American Shorthair, recounted a similar arrangement she would make: “I will leave my cat at home and ask a friend of mine to feed him. I will never put him in those cat hotels. Rumours have it that some clients discovered wounds on their pets after they had retrieved the pets from those hotels.” The arrangements my informants make for their pets are manifold, and so are the reasons behind it. What they reveal is that the way they treat their pets is equivalent to the way many treat their own children. Whereas many pet owners leave their pets at pet hotels, many parents leave their children at crèches whilst at work; both aim to ensure that their loved ones receive the most felicitous treatment.

Interaction between Pets and Pet Owners

This research found that the biology of pets would shape the way pets interact with their owners and thus their visibility. For pets that possess a higher ability to deliver message through body and/or verbal language, they are considered more intelligent and can interact with the owners more effectively. A distinct example goes to avian species – particularly parrots. Parrots are well-known for their human-like qualities in terms of the ability to learn human language and to use it meaningfully (see Pepperberg 1999). Eliot, a 26-year-old public servant who has plenty of experience in keeping common hill mynahs and African grey parrots, provided a vivid description of how his current African grey parrot managed to use human language aptly: “I think animals have a kind of spirituality (靈性). When I talk to my parrot, he seems to understand me. …Because the bird isn’t simply replicating what you said; he says something under specific circumstances without you asking him to. When my mom’s delivering a speech, or having an argument with someone, my parrot would say ‘Yes, yes, yes…’ as if he chose to side with my mom by intensifying her tone. But I don’t think I have taught my parrot about that before. He also knows ‘bye bye’ is used only when people leave the flat. When I leave my house, it would say ‘bye bye’ to me, but not to any other of my family members.” This highly “human” aspect of parrots may be the reason why Anne, 24, eventually decided to return her parrot to the pet shop after failing again and again trying to communicate with the parrot, because the parrot

remained “unfriendly” and kept pecking her arm. The parrot, as it were, possessed a strong and distinct character, as do some humans.

During the interview I had with Eliot, he used the term “spirituality” more than once to describe parrots as some “highly intelligent beings.” Such “spirituality,” I seek to further highlight, is characterised by not only parrots’ ability to speak, but also by their uncontrollability and elusiveness. That is, they would do things that their owners cannot foresee in advance. There is another account provided by him when he was talking about the departure of his mynah, which he had kept for ten years: “I think my mynah left me because he knew his life had nearly come to an end. A legend has it that these highly intelligent species (高等智慧生物) would leave their owners and isolate themselves when they know they’re going to die soon. So, one day, my mynah just suddenly flew out of the window, into the mountain. That’s it. I’ve never seen him again.” However mythical this account appears to be, it is nonetheless supported by some ethological research. Anthropologist Anderson Patricia (2003) points out that birds tend to hide their illness for fear that any sign of weakness should turn them to easy targets for predators. Although some vigilant readers might raise their eyebrows and question: If visibility is of tremendous importance in pet-keeping, wouldn’t this elusiveness of avian species render them relatively “invisible”? In fact, such elusiveness is a cardinal element of visibility. Unlike robots, which move and act only under the command of humans, pets are capable of doing things that their owners would not expect. If we take account of the fact that humans themselves would, likewise, do things of their own volition and sometimes act out of the blue, we might understand how this human feature constitutes the uniqueness and human-side of pets.

On the other side of the spectrum, we, again, have fish and prawns, which are generally considered devoid of intelligence or of limited intelligence by my informants. Max described his fish this way: “Fish are no match for cats or dogs. Fish only have limited intelligence. Their reaction is just a kind of respondent conditioning (條件反射). When you reach your hand over the tank, they know there must be food. Other than this, they know nothing. They don’t even know you’re their owner. But cats and dogs have spirituality (靈性).” Cindy, too, gave a similar description of her fish and prawns: “I know my responsibilities involved in taking care of them, but I don’t think they can sense that their lives have an element of human existence.” It remains controversial whether fish are as dumb as my informants described, for some scientific studies show that fish do possess quite a certain level of cognitive ability (see Alfieri & Lee 2006). But here, the biological

constraints of pets have a strong influence on the degree of visibility and thus the in-betweenness of pets. The reason why fish are always placed at the lowest rung of the "humanity" ladder, I strongly opine, is that they are the *silent* children who lack physical contact with their owners.

To gauge the animal visibility of a pet, it is hard not to look at how it fits into the owner's daily routines. Dogs and cats have the highest visibility since they, according to my informants, are able to partake in human activities and offer comfort and solace when the owners are in times of difficulty. Dorothy, a 48-year-old beautician who kept a male Bichon Frisé─ White B, and a male British Shorthair─ Ah Mi, gave the following account: "Every morning, from Monday to Saturday, Ah Mi wakes my husband by miaowing outside his bedroom. ...When I come back home [from work], White B greets me and wants me to hug him. When you're unhappy or under the weather, my pets know it too. These days I've been coughing a lot, and White B always stares at me and jumps on my thigh to check if I'm doing fine." Also, dogs, in the eyes of many informants, are good companions to whom they can talk freely. Anne, who currently kept a 10-year-old mongrel and had kept three other dogs before, recounted, "You can talk to them about everything, both happy and unhappy things. They never evade you. They stare at you and reserve a happy and innocent look only for you. They are always attentive. When talking with my friends, I sometimes end up arguing with them. But my pets never talk back. I know this relationship is somehow unilateral, but I feel very comfortable." The fact that pets offer their owners "unconditional" love and support despite their owners' frailties is put sentimentally and poetically by Serpell:

> By seeking to be near us and soliciting our caresses, by their exuberant greetings and pain on separation, by their possessiveness and their deferential looks of admiration, these animals persuade us that they love us and regard us highly, despite all our manifest deficiencies and failures (Serpell 1986, 114).

However, it should also be noted that compared to dogs, cats are usually considered more aloof and independent and therefore not as friendly as dogs, just as what Dorothy added, "Cats are a little bit special. Unlike dogs, who are more docile and friendly to humans, cats are by nature aloof."

What come after dogs and cats are reptiles, and in particular, turtles. They, too, are considered part of the owners' families, but their ability to interact was not particularly spoken highly of. Eliot, the aforementioned parrot-keeping informant who had also kept two

red-eared terrapins, admitted that though he treated them as his family members, their interaction was no match for that of his parrots. The lack of interaction between pet owners and their turtles is also supported by the account provided by Carmen, a 22-year-old student who has been keeping three Chinese stripe-necked turtles: “When they’re hungry, they approach you. But once they’re fed, they start to stay away from you.” When she was asked about the reason to keep turtles, she said, “Well, I love to watch them. When I walk past them [in the living room], I love to stop to appreciate their cute look.” The reason she gave implies that the turtles she kept were also objects for her visual consumption. My research has found that reptiles and fish are pets that usually can be kept *in sight* easily but not *in site*. That is, they do not have much interaction with the owners (from the owners’ perspective), and easily fall prey to mere visual consumption and become a *spectacle*. In this regard, pet fish are the most illustrative of the case. Ironically, it is Cindy, the previously mentioned fish-and-prawn-keeping PhD candidate, describes this scenario most succinctly: “When cats and dogs become part of your life, you also become part of their lives. For fish and prawns, they certainly become part of my life, but my existence seems always absent from their lives. …Though we feed them every two or three days, the aquarium itself is a closed eco-system. …I don’t think they’ve the ability to perceive the world outside the aquarium. Cats and dogs, on the contrary, live in your home. They’re aware of your returning and taking them out, and they completely understand your schedules.”

Cindy’s viewpoint on the difference between fish and other pets has offered a useful window for us to look into the importance of physical interaction. Her viewpoint clues us in about pet fish taking on a role of providing ornamental and aesthetic value for their owners. Brenda, a 45-year-old businesswoman with a monthly income of more than HKD $80,000 who kept a score of clownfish, stated, for example: “When we keep fish, what we enjoy most isn’t the interaction [with the fish], but the world we create in the aquarium. …All the decorations and coral [in the aquarium] are much more important.” Max, for another example, reinforced this notion: “When you design your own aquarium, it’s like building your own world.” When I visited my informants’ residences, I noticed that the fish my informants kept are all brightly coloured and shimming. Cindy’s zebrafish, for instance, are silver with eye-catching black stripes. Also, the informants spent quite a considerable amount of money on decorating their aquariums with artificial coral, vintage decorations, natural driftwood, decorative gravel, rocks and marbles, simulation plants décor, miniature cave landscaping, etc. In this regard, apart from playing a familial role, pet fish─ as well as

the environment in which they live— also perform the function as do sculpture and paintings. That is, they are "sights to behold."

What Makes a Pet's Life Grievable?

If there is one thing we have learnt from Neruda's poem, it would be that human-pet relationships can sometimes, with the passage of time, become too deep; the deaths of pets are followed by sorrow too great to face and erase. But deaths, as well as the sadness induced, also come in many forms and levels. Some deaths, my study will show, are more grievable whereas some are not.

In the dog-keeping informants' opinion, the death of their dog(s) was said to be the most poignant, especially when it is the informant who decided to euthanise the pet. Before giving birth to her daughter, Dorothy had adopted a Chihuahua. But unfortunately, it was diagnosed with a heart problem and pleural effusion. As Dorothy recounted, "The doctor said that I could either take it back home [and spend a few more days with it] or leave it at the clinic [for the euthanasia operation]. I chose the former. The next morning, I found the dog was so painful, so I decided to take it to the clinic [for euthanasia]. When my dad died, he left me a dog. That dog also died in front of me by euthanasia. Both dogs struggled before the injection, but after I whispered to them that they would die more comfortably in this way, they ceased to struggle. Before they died, tears were flowing from their eyes. After my dogs died, …I cried for a month." A similar heartbroken account was provided by Anne, who experienced the deaths of three dogs— in chronological order a three-year-old mongrel, a sled dog, and a schnauzer: "[The mongrel] was the first dog I kept. At that time I was still pretty ignorant and had no idea what's wrong with him. Though I noticed something unusual, I wasn't aware of the gravity of the situation. I thought by giving him some water he would recover overnight, but only to find that he passed away that night. …We suspect that the dog took in some rat poison when our domestic helper was walking him. … [The sled dog] suffered from diabetes and … [h]is worsening health turned him from one being able to walk to one not being able to, and from one having good eyesight to a blind dog. Not much could be done even we took him to the vet. Though his life span was prolonged by medication, he became weaker and weaker. Finally, all you could see was an unconscious dog lying flat on the floor, always writhing in agony with his empty eyes. He could no longer recognise my voice however hard I called his name. So I decided to take him to the vet [for euthanasia]. My family and I burst into tears when the vet gave him the

injection. …The schnauzer also died two months after our sled dog had passed away, for no apparent reason."

Once the things with which we are familiar turn strange, the world will never ever be the same again. The conversation I had with Anne ended with her saying that "It took me more than a month to walk out from the shadow [of the death of my mongrel]. From then on, I know something important in my life is forever gone." The pain experienced by my informants was so excruciating they actually felt slightly relieved right after their dogs had passed away, for all the pain the dogs had suffered at last melted into thin air. But the pain my informants suffered did not. If the arrival of death has taken away the pain suffered by the once-living, it has inflicted other pain on the living. With the pain branded itself into the deepest part of their heart and soul, they become the beings whose future is moulded by this painful past. When days stretch into months, and months stretch into years, the march of time has proved again and again to the living that some memories are just so beautiful they hurt us most.

Although dogs are so far the most visible, that does not mean the death of a fish is not grievable. A sense of guilt would haunt the owner if it is him who inadvertently sent the pet to the gallows. During the interview with Cindy, she spoke of how she accidentally killed all the fish having forgotten to turn off the radiator behind the aquarium, and ended up boiling the water with the fish in it: "I felt very guilty for such a stupid thing I did. I kept blaming myself for failing to take care of my fish. When I went back home that day, and found all the fish floating in the water, dead, I was very shocked. One of the fish was very beautiful. It was in blue with a sharp red stripe on its back. After that accident, I never ever keep that species again, though I love the colour so very much."

Be that as it may, my research still found that for pets that are less visible like fish, their deaths sometimes did not matter that much to their owners. Ivan, a 50-year-old security guard who keeps a few guppies, said that, "Cat and dogs are living beings. But even one of the fish dies, you won't feel that sad, right? A fish isn't like an animal. When you compare a fish to an animal, such as a bird, a rabbit, or a parrot, you don't have the same feeling. I used to keep pigeons. …If any of them got lost or died of illness, I felt deeply upset. If you keep a pet, you get emotionally involved. But the emotions involved in keeping fish…are just slightly different." In this account, the informant not only dehumanised and de-animalised his fish, but also turned them into the *living dead* ─ the beings that are not sentient or do not possess any qualities we can found on living organisms.

In her *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler discusses what makes for a grievable life, saying to make a life not grievable, it has to be made unworthy of grieving and mourning, by dehumanising the subject and making its death unrecognised. Though Butler herself considers an animal's life not grievable, her notion of grievability can still be applied to pets, for most owners regard their pets as human children. If the way we deal with the death of a pet tells us how much its life is grieved for, it can as well tell us how "human" the pets are in the eyes of their owners. The visibility of pets can be seen not only in the amount of grief induced, but also in the way the owner deals with the pet carcass. For pets that are move visible, their deaths are generally treated more seriously and decently. When Kelvin's Cavalier King Charles Spaniel called Popeye died of cardiomegaly one night, he sneaked out and buried the carcass secretly, although doing so is illegal in Hong Kong. If the dead body was not dealt with properly, the owner often felt an enormous sense of guilt. Anne expressed this feeling in her account: "The dead body of my mongrel (her first dog) was wrapped up by just a piece of cloth and was put in a dumpster next to my house by my parents. I was awfully guilty about that. But at that time I was way too small to learn to handle a dead body properly. [Before the second and my third dogs died,] I did some research on the Internet and called the volunteers to my house [when the dogs died]. They carried the bodies away, sterilised and cleansed them thoroughly before sending them to cremation." But for the less visible pets like fish and prawns, their bodies are handled perfunctorily, as shown in an account provided by Cindy: "I usually dumped [the dead fish and dead prawns] in the trash bin or flushed their bodies down the toilet. …But most of the time I asked my boyfriend to handle that, because I felt a little bit sad. Oh, actually, that only happened for a few times. Because my prawns will eat the dead fish. So sometimes, only when we notice the number of fish has decreased do we find out some fish have died." The fact that the prawns would nibble at the dead fish until nothing solid is left behind has further made the dead bodies of the fish unrecognised, so that, adapting Butler's saying, the deaths of the fish leave "a mark that is no mark" (2004, 36).

Marching Towards Posthumanism?

I began the previous part with some official statistics, hoping to give my readers a rough picture of pet-keeping in Hong Kong. But under no circumstances should we plunge headlong into drawing a conclusion that "pets in Hong Kong are generally mistreated." The

problem of feral or stray dogs and cats can also be a consequences of the loopholes in pet trade and a surging increase in the number of illegal breeders (see Whitfort *et al*. 2013; Whitfort & Woodhouse 2010), which are not directly related to pet-keeping in Hong Kong. Accordingly, I argue that the official figures only superficially reflect some ill-treatment of pets, but they are not sufficient for our apprehending the deeper aspects of human-pet relations.

When we step into the (post)modern world, the interplay between humans and animals remains significant due to the dramatic cultural and social changes. The study of animals, as well as that of pet-keeping, is a self-reflection of the Western philosophy tradition dominated by humanism─ the idea that humankind should be placed at the apex of any understanding of the universe. In view of this intellectual albatross, posthumanist Braidotti (2013), for instance, propounds a concept called "zoe"─ "the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself" (2013, 60), whose goal is to bridge the crevasse amongst all living organisms. Derrida (2008), in a similar vein, challenges the binary opposition between mankind and animals. Too, Haraway (2008) contradicts the celebration of "human exceptionalism," arguing that humans are just one knot in the web of inter-species dependencies. This school of posthumanist thought, I believe, can serve as a *coup de grâce* to breakdown the long-established power structure in which we─ humans─ are considered superior to other non-human beings. But does pet keeping in Hong Kong demonstrate these posthuman features? Is there any unequal power relation in a human-pet relationship? The sub-sections below aim to grace these questions with a satisfying answer.

Inside, Outside, and Captivity

One of the most far-reaching implications of pet keeping is that pets are invited into the domestic sphere (the human world) from the outside world (the non-human world). This inside/outside discourse was widely used by most of the informants who kept dogs and/or cats. In the eyes of them, the world outside their residences is, allow me to quote from Sylvester Stallone, "a very mean and nasty place." They genuinely believe had they failed to remain vigilant when taking their dogs or cats out, their docile pets would very likely get infected with virus, hurt by mischievous kids, hit by drunk drivers, injured by broken glass on the road, or poisoned.

A well-reasoned account was provided by Anne, 24, who decided to walk the dog herself after she suspected her domestic helper caused the death of her dog because of

shirking the duties: “If I had walked the dog myself, my mongrel wouldn’t have died [of eating rat poison]. Domestic helpers always play with their smartphones when walking our dogs. … But we’re different. We beware how dangerous outside can be. …There’s garbage on the road and fleas in the grass. We check the route to make sure it’s safe before we allow the dog to walk on it.” By the same token, Kelvin, the owner of a 5-year-old poodle called Gigi, never takes his dog out for fear that Gigi should get dirty after coming into contact with parasites such as fleas and ticks. Apart from the unclean environment that worries many of my informants, some informants are concerned about their dogs or cats running away from the owners. Such concern is supported by the description provided by Helen, 22, the owner of a male English Cocker Spaniel. Similarly, Isaac, 24, the owner of an American Shorthair, once said: “My cat can never go back to nature again. When he has lived with us long enough, he becomes so afraid of the outside world. It’s too dangerous out there.”

The findings are not surprising at all, on account of the sobering fact that compared to dogs and cats, other pets such as reptiles and hamsters are rarely taken out, not to mention that fish are always in the aquarium at home, *in situ*. The only exception we have is perhaps the avian species. Eliot frequently takes his African grey parrot for a walk because its feathers have to be dried after it bathes. But he never worries about the pet getting dirty or trying to escape, for he would fasten one of its parrot’s claws with a small string to a T-shaped frame, so that the parrot would always stay close to him and would never come into contact with the “polluted” environment (from his perspective, that is, the ground). Mark, 32, the owner of a female cockatiel, expressed similarly: “Taking my cocktatiel for a walk every day is important, because my bird needs vitamin D to stay healthy. …As long as you keep your eyes on [the parrots], there’s nothing to worry about.”

However, as sharply pointed out by Fudge, “[pets] live with us, but are not us” (2002b, 28). Many pets are indeed kept outside in the garden or in a cage, thus offering no companionship or partnership for the pet owners at all (DeMello 2012, 150). If the “outside” world is considered dirty, dodgy and unruly, we need to examine how this perception shapes the “inside” world─ that is, the household, and to see whether this “inside” world is constructed in a way that pets are actually given a lower familial status. The house is, as it were, a domestic habitat in which pet owners and their pets live together. For pets that are more visible, such as dogs and cats, they are permitted to exercise and act relatively freely in the house. On the other hand, pets that are not as visible as them, such as reptiles, hamsters and fish, are usually confined to a limited space/place. Although pets are

considered children, as demonstrated previously, they are not entirely humans because of the *boundaries* established by the pet owners. Implied by the informants, the major reason for setting up these boundaries is to contain the *dirt* carried by the pets. In her *Purity and Danger* (1966), anthropologist Mary Douglas notes that the concept of dirt cannot be understood unless dirt is placed in different times and different mores under careful scrutiny. Since dirt is something considered out-of-order, boundaries are set up to prevent the *unclean* (disorder) from contaminating the *clean* (existing order). Douglas' theory on dirt can be made an analogy to the boundaries set up by my informants. There is an account from Anne: "I keep the mongrel in the garden. He's allowed to enter our living room only when it's dry weather. …My family and I always stay clean. If the dog walks into my house with his dirty feet, our home would be dirty and muddy. Sometimes he's allowed to get in if he has just bathed. …All of us (Anne and her family) never sleep with the dog or let him walk on our bed, because we're a little bit allergic to its hair and saliva." Dogs being the most visible pets hitherto, they are nonetheless not allowed to enter the "restricted areas" because of the contaminants associated with them. In Anne's case, she and her family members considered themselves clean but considered the saliva and hair of the dog unclean. The saliva and hair, thereupon, become contaminants that have to be kept off from areas where human activities take place. It seems that the problem of dirt does not present itself had the dog never been walked by his owner. The aforementioned poodle Gigi, for instance, never leaves the house, so Kelvin would sleep with Gigi if his little brother does not.

But some boundaries are set up not for the sake of humans but in the interest of pets. Dorothy, for example, walks her Bichon Frisé twice a day but leaves the British Shorthair at home (because it loathes going out): "The cat's allowed to go anywhere [in the house]. But the dog isn't permitted to enter the kitchen and toilet. We walk the dog, not the cat, so the dog would be dirtier. Also, the cat eats and excretes in the kitchen, and drinks in the toilet. So we don't let the dog get into those areas. But we would sleep with them. The dog sleeps with me at night. The cat sleeps on my bed during daytime." In her account, the cat is given an entrée into all the places in the house, whereas the dog is not because of the dirt it carries after it being walked. However, Dorothy also mentioned that she would always leave the cage open so that both the cat and the dog could take a nap in it, which also means, theoretically speaking, the cat can be "polluted" by the dirt the dog carries from the "outside" world. Thereby, this research found that, as did Mary Douglas, dirt is a matter culturally defined. Dorothy recalled that the 14-year-old cat was the first existing pet which

became part of her family; thereby, it was privileged like the elder brother. The Bichon Frisé— the "little brother"— is therefore less privileged. In this way, the line between clean and unclean is defined not actually by the literal contaminants, but by the way the owner positions her pets with a familiar hierarchy used by human beings. And this is why Douglas sharply notes that "there is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder" (1966, 2).

Pet-keeping involves lines of demarcation being drawn between the inside world (the house) and the outside world (the world outside the house). But very often, a house is also segregated into smaller versions of "inside areas" and "outside areas." The former is reserved for pet owners, or in a rare case, for pets loved very much by their owners; the latter are for most pets, who still carry dirt, "wildness," or "unruliness." Only when the pets from the "outside areas" undergo *purification* (e.g. bathing and cleansing) can they receive permission to enter the "real" human world.

Finally, the many joyful episodes of pet owners living harmoniously with their pets under the same roof have sometimes turned us oblivious to the very fact that pets are *ab initio* in a state of *captivity*. Some of my informants are rather aware of the fact that pet keeping has, to some extent, deprived the pets of the freedom they supposedly have. For instance, Carmen, the owner of three turtles, articulated her sympathy and guilt for keeping pets: "Sometimes, I find the turtles pretty pathetic to be stuck in such a small tank. …The bigger turtle always wants to escape. …I want to release them, but I'm afraid they'll die in the woods right away. …Five years ago, I let the turtles play in the sandpit next to my home. They seemed happy because of the chance of enjoying sunbathing. But once I [took them home and] put them back in the tank, they struggled to climb out. What I was doing is like giving a prisoner freedom but imprisoning him again." Unlike the previous informants, Carmen is one of the few informants who experienced such an "epiphany" that pet keeping has done more harm than good. To her, the world outside her residence is not so much a Hobbesian state-of-nature world as a piece of virgin land that is yet to be sullied by humankind.

Cohabitation as Coevolution?

"Pets are commodities that many people use, like other consumer goods, as a means of constructing identities" (Mullin 1999, 215-216). This conclusion is legitimate at first sight. A litany of literature has cast light on the relationship between pet keeping and the

establishment of one's identity. That is, the identity of an owner is said to be expressed by the characteristics carried by a particular kind of breeds. It is Franklin who gives us a vivid example: "Cats are mysterious, secretive, sexual (female), aloof, intellectual, independent and spiritual; they are of nature whereas dogs are of culture" (1999, 101). Suggested therefore by some that cats are more associated with women (Mertens 1991). This kind of overdone trope is not foreign to my informants. Helen, a dog owner, for example, told us that "those who keep cats are usually people like artists. …They have a very different personality from, say, those who keep dogs." Research of this ilk, which places its focal point on symbolic reductionism, very often turns pets as mere objects, turns a blind eye to pet's agency, and is unaware that a theoretical trait (the symbolic meaning of a pet) does not necessarily lead to a practical trait (keeping a pet). Some recent findings from Lustig and Cramer (2015) have shown that dog and cat owners are very similar in terms of the motivations for keeping pets; thereby, it is perilous to stereotype the character of an individual by simply judging what pet(s) he owns.

In the case of my research, I found that the major rationale that lies behind keeping a pet is more about *serendipity* than is about choice. That is, my informants did not choose what pet to keep in advance. Eliot's current African grey parrot was obtained from a friend of his mom, who needed to urgently transfer the bird because of migration issue. Isaac's first American Shorthair was originally found abandoned in the countryside and then retrieved by volunteers. Isaac shortly thereafter adopted the cat even though it was already mentally challenged. Anne's current mongrel had been found abandoned next to a pet shop in Sai Kung, and Anne and her family therefore decided to took it home. When Dorothy's current Bichon Frisé was still a puppy, it was found abandoned in Mainland China. It was Dorothy and her daughter who decided to adopt it. And during my interview with Dorothy, she stressed many times that her encounter with the dog was a "fateful coincidence" (緣分).

It goes without saying that the encounters with pet fish are slightly different. Keeping fish is usually a planned decision made by the owners to seek entertainment. Ivan gave us an illustration of the point: "I used to work in an office in which 80% of my colleagues kept fish. I guess it's because we all wanted to have some lively atmosphere (生氣) in the office. When you got tired of working, watching the fish swimming back and forth could be a good pastime." Also, fish are chosen because of the economical benefits since they are relatively easy to take care of. This is supported by Cindy's experiences: "At that time I lived in an apartment shared by another four tenants, so keeping dogs wasn't a

good idea. …But keeping fish is good and doesn't cost much. They tend not to run around or shit around making my apartment dirty."

Moreover, keeping pets is said to be able to fulfil a pedagogical purpose. By giving children pets, they can learn such core social values as responsibility and compassion (Fifield & Forsyth 1999). Using pets as educators seems even more significant when we are heading towards (or already in) a cyborg epoch which shears us off the warmth of humankind and then engulfs us with the coldness of technology, as pointed out by Levinson:

> Children, even in a world which surrounds us with machines and inanimate objects to which the rhythms must be geared, are still able to use pets to fulfil deep emotional needs and to serve as a bridge to human society (Levinson 1980, 80).

However, ideals are ideals. They often have conflicts with practical situations. Even though some of my informants attempted to use pets to socialise their offspring into caring and responsible people, the effectiveness was not as prominent as expected. In many cases, parents with the intention to educate their children through pet keeping eventually became the ones who take care of the pets. Ivan, the fish keeping informant, commented, "I encourage my children to keep fish, because it helps nourish a good deal of discipline. They need to change the water, wash the tank, feed the fish on time. And they need to observe the fish's unusual behaviour, which improves the power of observation." But ironically it turned out that now it is always Ivan himself who takes care of the fish. Dorothy shared the same feeling when talking about the hamster of her daughter: "I think those who treat small animals kindly are better than those who don't keep pets. At least these people won't be cruel to people. And it's better for my children to get along with other people. …At first, Daisy's (her daughter) boyfriend saw a dumped hamster in the park. … Daisy said she would take care of the hamster. I didn't like the idea as we already keep White B and Ah Mi. I'm afraid they would dislike having another member in our home. …And as you can see, now it's me who take care of her hamster, sigh…" These informants noted that their children were still studying (secondary school), so the pet-keeping responsibility often fell on their shoulders.

From these accounts provided by the informants, it is pertinent to note that education is not a compelling reason for keeping pets, because if these informants found pet keeping failing to be their children's educators, they should have abandoned the pets after the pets

lost their "use value." But indeed, this is never found on my informants, not even on those who keep fish. More to the point, all my informants said that they considered it a life-long commitment to care for their pets until the pets pass away. Those who keep dogs groom and cleanse the dogs themselves. Those who keep birds prudentially spray water on the feathers to prevent their birds from getting heatstroke in summer. And those who keep fish would borrow books to learn about offering the best environment for their fish. Therefore, I seek further to explore into the interplay between pets and their owners. During a scintillating conversation I had with Eliot─ the parrot-keeping informant─ I asked about the relationship between pet keeping and the owner's character. But what he said has provided me with new insights into this issue: "Maybe our love for a particular kind of pets is mainly determined by the first pet we keep, which is a random process. …If your first pet's a turtle, then you'll slowly develop an affection for turtles. Through cohabitation, your psyche has been transformed, so has the psyche of the pet. …So I think this is a co-evolution. Humans always co-evolve with animals in many ways. Throughout the long course of human history, those who lived with cows were infected with cowpox (vaccinia), but it's also this reason that these people were immune to smallpox. So virus infection is a major medium that physiologically links humans and animals together."

Unlike many other informants, Eliot is the only person who brought on the possibility that both pets and pet owners are affected by each other and thus leading to co-evolution. With all the platitudes stressing how pets are objects subject to exploitation and abuse, we might feel tempted to consider another alternative─ that is, pets do have a certain degree of *agency* in human-pet relationships. Non-human agency has been a hot potato in animal-related studies, for it is sometimes criticised for the misuse of anthropomorphism (see De Waal 1999; Thompson 1994). Epley *et al.* (2007) summarise three factors that explain humans' anthropomorphising non-humans:

> a.) *Elicited agent knowledge*: knowledge about humans is the prerequisite for inductive reasoning when considering non-human agents;
> b.) *Effectance motivation*: anthropomorphism helps us reduce uncertainty when alternative models (like science) are not available;
> c.) *Sociality motivation*: anthropomorphism is crucial to the maintenance of one's social relations.

Anthropomorphism is important for us to understand humans as much as it is to understand

animals. In both situations, anthropomorphism takes place to varying degree. Thereby, there is only one question remaining: Whilst we are "tapping" into the mind of our pets, would our pets also do so to "read" our mind in a similar vein? That is, to put it more precisely: Is the communication between pets and their owners bilateral? If the answer is affirmative, how can such communication take place?

Haraway (2008) sets a possible path for us— training. She espouses the idea that training is a way to get a pet unmoored from the status of victim, because training sets up a relation between unequal qualities that humans and animals respectively possess. The differences in language, body language, and sensorial experience can be compensated by the training process under which both pet owners and pets have to become attuned to a new means of communication. Undoubtedly, we should also beware that this means of communication is not perfectly neutral. More often than not, it is defined by humans who have power. But what my study endeavours to show is that, by pet owners seeking to establish communication and contact with their pets, they may start to tilt away from a self-aggrandising attitude towards animals, on account of the fact that such relationship is structured not only by the humans' interests but by the animals' as well (DeMello 2012, 155), which therefore makes "[c]o-constitutive companion species and coevolution" possible (Haraway 2008, 220). In this regard, pet owners themselves also become an in-between category.

Here are some examples provided by my informants, who recounted how they tried to understand what their pets wanted to impart. For example, Dorothy's cat Ah Mi and dog White B delivered their message to the owner with sound and body language: "My cat sometimes sits in front of the toilet door after eating, hoping me to open the door for him to drink from the basin. After drinking, he miaows again to ask you put him down. …When I'm sitting on the sofa, my dog slightly scratches my hand, telling me to massage his chest. Once I stop [massaging], he slightly scratches you again." A similar account was given by Max, who keeps fish: "Velvet cichlids become aggressive and defensive when their territory gets invaded, so I separated my two velvet cichlids in two different aquariums. …Velvet cichlids have beautiful scales, and the colours will change when they're angry. Their dorsal fins erect as well when they're angry. When you observe these cues, you'd better be cautious." Avian species, too, demonstrate a similar training process. Ivan used to keep pigeons in the past, and he attested to the good memory of pigeons. If trained well, pigeons learnt to perch on his shoulder when they got the signal. For training parrots, Eliot simply

told us that he just needed to speak to his parrots like he did to a human, although the use of complicated wording was to be avoided.

For Haraway, training is a process through which both parties can locate something they mutually enjoy, and this process is also not based on the owners' requiring submission and obedience from the pets. However, Haraway may be over optimistic about the power relation involved in training. In my research, very often the owners are the ones who exercise a certain degree of power over the pets. When Kelvin's poodle misbehaves, he will bop the dog on its buttock. When Anne's mongrel does something unacceptable, she will scold it. Scolding is a very common practice found in training pets, as proved by Dorothy: "I would scold my dog [when he is naughty], just like teaching kids. After you've locked them (the pets) in the cage or hit them for once, they would learn." From this description, her dog is indeed treated like a child. In some rare cases, more extreme methods would be adopted. When Isaac's American Shorthair suffered from stomachache and excreted around the house, making the place messy, he simply let his cat stay hungry for a whole day for punishment.

As with many aforesaid situations, fish, which have low visibility, are the pets with which the owners scarcely seek bilateral communication. Oftentimes, the owner just simply projects his subjective thoughts on the pet, regardless of the thoughts of the fish. Candy, the PhD candidate, recounted some of her "deep thoughts" projected: "I often come up with some philosophical questions when gazing my fish and prawns. I sometimes would think: Are these fish living well? Are our lives similar to theirs?... My thoughts change a lot. They're affected by my life experience and mood. When I'm pretty unhappy, I'd tell the fish: 'You guys are so good. You don't have to compete for anything. No big fish would threaten any of you.' But sometimes I would think: 'It's so stupid for you trying to swim to the top of the aquarium and escape. Why don't you just give up? Both you and I are trapped in a cage. To struggle is futile. Even if you can escape, there may not be a better world outside for you.'"

The Wizardry of Media Representations

In this subsection, I hope also to extend into the discussion of the relationship between media representations and attitudes towards pets. Although it is not the *pièce de résistance* of this research, it is nonetheless related to animal visibility. Media representations─ be it documentaries, fiction films, TV series, or news reports─ are capable

of exerting a helluva influence on the public perception of animals as well as of what "nature" is. When relating to the naming of her pet, Anne provided me with an absorbing reason for calling her mongrel "Little Q" (see the third part of this research): "It's because of a film called *Quill*, in which the dog looks smart and vigilant and fast-learning. All these qualities match those of my mongrel, so we decided to use that name." *Quill* (Yōichi Sai 2004), the film she mentioned, tells a story about a Labrador Retriever being trained as a guide dog to serve a blind journalist. Kelvin (owner of a poodle) told me that his favourite film was *Cats & Dogs* (Lawrence Guterman 2001), in which cats are the evil power that plans to hatch insidious plots to rule the world, whereas dogs are faithful guardians of humankind. Documentaries, too, are favoured by many informants of mine. Eliot (owner of a parrot) loves to watch nature documentaries, in particular those about the courtship rituals performed by birds. Carmen (owner of three turtles) enjoys nature documentaries about fabulous marine life because "it takes a nature documentary a long period of time to capture the most beautiful episodes of the beings living in the ocean." There might be the case that these media representations affect their viewers' choice of pets, it is equally possible that the causal chain is the reverse— those who have a penchant for a particular kind of pets are more likely to expose themselves to related media representations. Of course, there can also be a total absence of cause-effect relationship between these two factors.

Nevertheless, under no circumstances should the mighty power of films and documentaries be underestimated, for film images are representations that can act on our behaviour. DeMello (2012, 336) shows that the abandonment of the types of animals depicted in the animal films is a frequent concomitant of a surge in purchases of the same animals. It is known that fiction films are loaded with drama, but that does not mean documentary films are perfectly neutral. As Aufderheide (2007) sharply notes, "When documentarians deceive us, they are not just deceiving viewers but members of the public who might act upon knowledge gleaned from the film. Documentaries are part of the media that help us understand not only our world but our role in it, that shape us as public actors" (4-5). We are more inclined to trust what documentaries show us because they purport to film the "real" and "actualities"; thus our trust in them would easily be transformed into the gullibility on which the filmmakers can prey. (Re)presenting animals is always a thorny issue. This is particularly true in the case of documentaries, for animals are always the *silent Other* — silent not only because their voice is brushed aside, but also because it can hardly be heard— which henceforth becomes *la problématique* that the filming of animals can not

easily evade. The way media representations portray animals will shape the visibility of the animals and thus our attitudes towards them. This is an anthropological study of pet keeping practices in Hong Kong, but it is of tremendous importance to take the impact of media representations into serious account. The way we understand animals is tightly related to the way we represent them, and these representations would in turn produce substantial effects upon our understanding of animals. Thanks to the rapid advancement in technology, now films and documentaries can bring (representations of) animals into human households more easily, so much so that the visibility of pets and media representations are on a Möbius strip.

Conclusion

Returning to Derrida's saying I quoted at the beginning of part two, we might now be able to answer the queries thereof I raised. In the past few decades, human-animal relations have become the focal point of many disciplines, because the arrival of modernity, in particular rapid urbanisation and technological innovations, moved animals out of our urban dwellings. But the arrival of postmodernity has then propelled us to repair the already damaged ecosystem and to re-connect ourselves to animals— which were for long consigned to oblivion by humans. Thanks to the spread of humane movement, in the course of such reconnection we are further struck by such horrendous episodes as farm animals being slaughtered, the extensive use of laboratory animals, and the thriving animal captivity industries. This is perhaps, allow me to adapt Derrida, why we feel naked when an animal looks at us. Ashamed of this heart-wrenching picture of human selfishness, we react to this "animal looking" by trying to establish fair and harmonious relationships with non-human species of every hue.

Having wholeheartedly subscribed to what Walter Benjamin proposed in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1968)— "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (255), I dedicated myself to detail and recount the (hi)story of *my people* without having "compassion fatigue" whilst I was an undergraduate. Before I embarked on this study on pet keeping, by a strange quirk of fate, I came across the article "Animals' Attitudes of People" (1994), by biologist Jennie Coy, who argues that it is important to study the behavioural patterns and complexities of the domesticates to which we are close, for it helps us unravel animals' attitudes towards humankind. Also, she urges us to appreciate the differences

between humans and animals, since the latter are capable of doing lots and lots of complex things way better than we are. Coy's words were one of the reasons that I, upon completion of my first degree, decided to venture into Human-Animal Studies (HAS) to detail and recount the (hi)story of animals.

I have no intention of concealing my elation of having observed a heightened environmental awareness found amongst the general public nowadays. Probably, the change has been effected partly because of the propositions made by academics and activists like Peter Singer (1975) and Tom Regan (2004), and partly because of the prevalence of (natural) documentaries that cast dazzling light upon the human exploitation of animals and of the environment. Some examples at hand are *Earthlings*. (Shaun Monson 2005), *The Cove* (Louie Psihoyos 2009) and *A Fall from Freedom* (Stanley Minasian 2011). If the crevasse between animals and humans is, as Midgley (1983) points out, a deliberate construct to allow humans to exploit animals without having humans' conscience pricked, then I consider that we are now already living in an age that our lives are closely tied to those of animals, so much so that the fate of animals and that of us are tightly intertwined.

That being said, I am also acutely aware that the writing of animals from the perspective of humans would, pointed out by Fudge (2002a), very often lead to an anthropocentric account of the silent Others, thus failing to present an authentic image of animals. When doing this research, I found the same quandary of animals being the silent Others in human-pet relationships. Our efforts to examine human-pet relations would prove futile should we turn a blind eye to the habit of naming pets, the interactions between pets and their owners, pet loss bereavement, the politics of household space, cohabitation and training, and the role played by media representations. Although pets are animals invited into human households, thus becoming in-between beings, the way pet owners treat them varies due to the different levels of visibility. The level of visibility is determined by not only the cultural and social meanings bestowed on pets, but also by the biological constraints of the pets themselves. On the spectrum of in-betweenness, dogs and cats are the highly visible pets, avian species and turtles are secondary to them, and fish and prawns have the lowest visibility. The variation in visibility therefore shapes the way pet owners treat them. Though all the pets are treated as family members— in particular children— dogs and cats are named children who can fit neatly into the daily routines of their owners, and whose deaths are the most grievable. On the other side of the spectrum, fish and prawns are oftentimes nameless, and their deaths do not particularly leave a hard mark in their owners'

hearts. In this research, I also explore the possibility of a posthuman cross-species relationship being formed in the course of keeping pets. Through training, pet owners themselves also learn to chuck part of the human subjectivity and to compromise with their pets, thus becoming also in-between beings. In this way, there is a possibility that humans themselves are moving away from the superiority of humans over other animals.

However, when looking into the politics of space segregation and into the unequal power relations in training pets, we find that human-pet relations themselves are still partly based on humans' wielding control over their pets. Of course, it would be neglect had I failed to mention one of the implications of pet-keeping. It seems that many of the informants strongly believe there is a positive correlation between treatment of pets and treatment of other animals.

> I feel angry when reading the news about eating and slaughtering dogs in Mainland China. How on earth could those people treat dogs like that? The biggest difference between dogs and animals is that dogs have developed a close relationship with humans for a long time. This relationship is like the ones you find in friendship and family. It's very uncivilised and immoral to treat dogs cruelly. (Anne, 24, student)

This is another issue too deep and too broad to discuss here. But we should note that back in thirteenth-century Europe, cats were associated with witchcraft and were actively captured and burnt to death. It is generally believed that our love for pets can to some extent be extended to other species. But it would be a horrible mistake to assume there is a certain connection between the two. After all, in our daily lives, we can oftentimes observe those who treat their pets well may not treat others (humans or/and other animals) well. A good example at hand is a historical figure who himself was a vegetarian and loved his German Shepherd, Blondi, very much, but he was also notorious for killing millions of Jews in the Second World War. His name is Adolf Hitler. A convincing explanation can be provided by Erica Fudge, "[T]the pet can be— and usually is— loved as an individual creature, distinct from notions of species or any other category. A pet is a pet first, an animal second" (2002b, 32).

As anthropologist Molly Mullin mentioned in "Animals and Anthropology" (2002), unlike the old anthropocentric approaches adopted by previous anthropologists *extraordinaire*, there has been movement towards approaches that concern themselves with animal agency. But I still consider posthuman cross-species relationships a tract of barren

land yet to be trekked across by anthropologists. The aim of my research is to try to contribute to an anthropological engagement through the lens of one of the many forms of cross-species relationships─ human-pet relationships. Many human-pet relations, as demonstrated by my study, involve unequal power relations. But my research still contributes to the understanding that "pets"─ though commonly considered victims of captivity in the eyes of animal right advocates─ are not necessarily that perilous.

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