

**T. Volker, “The Cat”,
in *The Animal in Far Eastern Art and especially in the art of
the Japanese netsuke with references to Chinese origins,
traditions, legends, and art,*
Leiden: 1975 (first published in 1950).**

The Japanese cat (photo 17¹), *neko*, seems, because of its bobtail, more closely related to the cat of the Isle of Man and that of the East Indies than to the more commonly known European and other varieties. The cat has been imported from India via China and Korea probably together with Buddhism in the 6th century. A story tells us that Prince Shotoku had offerings put in front of a cat, deeming it a particular being.

In Kaempfer’s time² the “lap-cat” was the fashion, for he writes: “They have a particular beautiful kind of Cats, which is with them as with us a domestick animal. They are of a whitish colour with large yellow and black spots and a very short tail, as if it had been purposely cut off. They don’t care for mousing but they love mightily to be carried about and caress’d, chiefly by women.”

Like the dog the cat is charged with supernatural power and in Japan, notwithstanding what Kaempfer told us, it did serve as a mouser too. This appears from the fact that in ancient times cats were kept in Buddhist temples to guard the precious manuscripts, imported from China, against rats. Gradually people became accustomed to keeping cats in secular buildings. Others have it, that there were originally only wild cats in Japan—they did not exist there in the 18th and 19th centuries nor do they now—and that during the reign of the emperor Ichijō (986-1011), a number of small “house cats” were imported from China under the name of *kara-neko*, Chinese cat. They were then, so the story goes, kept as precious things in the imperial palaces, as treasures whose descendants later got scattered about the country.

However this may be, it is a fact that with the coming of the cat all its baggage of superstition and legend was also imported, a mass of spiritual byplay, to which the vivid Japanese imagination has been adding since. According to Taoists, and when it is a question of evil cats their ideas predominate, cats and especially old and black ones are to be feared as dangerous demons who after devouring old women take their place for further evil doing. In China the cat was an emblem of longevity because *mao* means cat and dotage (90 years). This idea was not taken over by the Japanese.

Far less than the dog the cat is seen as a netsuke³ and as a rule such a netsuke is of late date. In folklore it also plays a smaller part. Probably Buddhism has had something to do with this. For when Buddha died, all the animals wept, with the exception of the cat. In popular stories cats take the shape of old women, priests, *yamabushi*, courtesans and young ladies in order to deceive their victims or to take revenge for wrongs suffered. The soul of a dead cat, we have seen the same of *tanuki*, and we shall see it again when coming to the fox, can take possession of a human body, speak through its mouth and kill it. And a cat can, even without metamorphosis, and provided it be old enough, speak like man. The most feared variety of

¹ A photo found elsewhere in this book. (ed’s note)

² Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716) is the author of a classic work on Japanese history. A French version is [available online](#); the passage quoted here is found at the end of the first paragraph of [page 109](#). (ed.’s note)

³ Traditional miniature sculpture. Volker explains in the introduction: “This ‘root to hang’ is a very old and necessary article of dress. Because the kimono had no pockets, the netsuke became a supplement to the Japanese dress. For the things [which] one had to carry on one’s person out of doors were hung from the girdle by means of a small cord. To prevent the cord from slipping, a toggle was needed, the netsuke. (...) Originally the netsuke was no more than a round and flat piece of hard wood or a qua[i]ntly shaped tool (...). With the spread of civilization there grew a delight in beautiful things and the netsuke became more and more a work of art, in the end even of such refinement as to become almost exclusively ornament.”

demon-cat has a forked or a double tail and is called *nekomata*, forked cat. In the “*Hakkenden*”, a novel by Bakin (1767-1848) a cat with double tail is killed by one of the heroes, one of the “dogs” (see there⁴), Inumura Daikaku. The demon cat of Nabeshima has become a classic.

The daimyo of Hizen, of the clan Nabeshima, had a favourite wife, O Toyo. One night an enormous demon-cat killed her and buried her in the garden. Taking the shape of its victim it entered the palace. From this night on it tired and tormented the daimyo, so that his health rapidly declined and his life was endangered. As the members of his household saw that the condition of their lord always became worse during the night, they decided to have armed watchmen stand guard over him. This was of no avail for all the watchmen fell asleep without anybody ever noticing anything and the false O Toyo was able to enter the room of the prince. Then it was decided to call in the priest Ruiten who was to try to bring about recovery by prayer. One night the priest saw a young soldier, Ito Soda, sunk in prayer before a statue of the Buddha in the palace courtyard. Being only a common soldier he was not allowed inside the palace and so he prayed for the recovery of his master in the yard. Touched by so great a sense of duty in one so young, the priest used his influence and Ito was allowed to take part in the night watches. At the fatal hour all the other watchmen fell asleep, but Ito Soda when he felt sleep overtaking him, thrust his dirk deep into his thigh and every time he felt drowsy again he turned it in the wound. When the false O Toyo in the act of going to the rooms of the prince saw that one of the watchmen was awake, she returned to her own apartments. This was repeated several nights and as she noticed that every time one of the watchmen stayed awake, she desisted. From the first night of Ito’s watching onwards the daimyo had recovered rapidly. Knowing now by whom the illness had been caused, the young man begged the building to be surrounded by armed men, that he might be able to fight the false favourite in her own apartments. As he entered O Toyo’s room, she attacked him with a halberd, the weapon of ladies of high rank, for the use of which there are special fencing rules. When she could no longer keep the young man off, she escaped suddenly taking the form of a gigantic cat with two tails, over the roofs of the palace buildings, in the direction of the mountains.

Different demon-cats have different names. The *neko-bake*, an old man-eating witch, enters houses in the form of a cat, stealing children to devour them. *Maneki-neko*, inviting cat, is a witch who takes the form of a kitten, entices passers-by by its winning ways and bewitches them.

In tales of more modern times the cat is generally spoken of with better feelings, more as we do of “Puss in Boots”. According to those tales the cat is a grateful being that sacrific[es] itself for its master.

Beneficent power was sometimes ascribed to cats, though in those cases the power was more that of their makers. Such was the case with the “*Nitta no neko*”, a painting of a cat by Nitta, that had the power to keep rats away from the building that harboured it. A similar power was attributed to the “*nemuri neko*”, sleeping cat, carved on a small panel by the famous sculptor Hidari Jingorô (see Horse), at Nikko’s mausoleum.

This mausoleum is a veritable storehouse of supernatural power. Many animals are represented there that have a special quality and Furu Tanuki (see Badger) must have been a man full of “soulmatter”. His personality has been held high by his clan who ruled Japan for two and a half centuries. His life has become a myth and he, naturally, a godlike being. As the art of the netsuke flourished during the Tokugawa-period it is natural that several animals, seen as netsuke, have some relation to Nikko. Such is for instance the case with monkey and horse.

⁴ A reference to the section dedicated to dogs elsewhere in this book. (ed’s note)

But to return to the cat. The golden cat of the priest Enchin had the same power in relation to ships as those of Nitta and Jingorô to buildings. As to ships, older and more properly Japanese than what is told about demon cats seems to me the belief among sailors, that a tortoise-shell cat, a *mike-neko* has the power to foretell storms and by climbing the mast to protect sailors against the spirits of the drowned that can never find rest and haunt the waves during storms to make victims in their turn. On few Japanese ships such a cat was wanting. Another popular superstition has it that if a cat is left alone with a corpse, the corpse will get up and dance.

Well known is the story of the silver cat Yoritomo gave as a present to Saigyô-hôshi, 1118-'90, as a token of his gratitude. A whole night through the first shogun had held a discussion with this famous poet-priest, a descendant of Tawara Tôda (see Centipede) about the art of archery and other military topics. To reward him for information received Yoritomo gave to Saigyô this silver cat. But the priest had so poor an opinion of presents and of material possessions that he gave the jewel to the first child he met. This cat may be seen as a netsuke, as also a beautiful Japanese lady, playing with a kitten, a famous courtlady called Josan no Miya.

In contrast to the tales of vampire cats are the stories of faithful cats, stories of later times, like the following. An enormous rat had found entrance to a temple in the shape of a *yamabushi* to kill the priest and devour him. But the cats of the priest obstructed the execution of the plan. They attacked the monster and saved their master's life by giving their own.

Under the heading: Rat it will be seen that not all rats are evil, quite the contrary, but here is still another story of an evil rat, the story of the faithful tomcat. A gigantic rat was in love with the daughter of the tom's master. In the story one reads of the psychic power, the second sight, of the cat, who knew beforehand that his master wanted to kill him, because the master, seeing him follow the girl about, thought him in love with her. But he succeeded in making his master understand that the big rat was in love with her and that he followed her to protect her. Afterwards together with a friend he attacked the giant rat and together with the monster he died, a sacrifice to the honour of his master.

Finally *neko* was a nickname for a geisha, a kitten with winning ways, a *maneki-neko*.