

Feline economy sees 'purrfect' growth

Wide range of products and services cater to the increasing needs of pet cat owners in China

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The world's most populous country is in love with cats. China's 59 million feline pets have spawned a "cat economy", a key sector of the overall pet industry that was worth 134 billion yuan (\$21 billion) last year, up from 100 billion yuan in 2016 and just 2 billion yuan in 2005.

The figure is expected to balloon to 188.5 billion yuan by 2020 with an annual growth of 30 percent, according to a report from Dog Network, China's online pet services provider.

While nekonomics describes Japan's cat economy, a new term — maonomics? — may be required to indicate China's growing fascination with cats, industry insiders said. (*Mao* is Chinese for cat.)

Globally, in terms of numbers of pet cats, China now ranks second behind the United States, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics.

It is a business that spans toys, nail clippers, fur care powder, anti-worm pills, balls, laser pens, soft tissue rolls, pooper scoopers, hygiene products, furniture, intelligent devices and cat teasers.

These are all in addition to popular products like cat food, cat fashion, and services like veterinary centers, pet care hotels and cat cafes (where patrons get to pet and cuddle freely roaming furry, purring, adorable feline beauties).

Not to forget funeral and internet services. That is not all. Exotic breeds sold as expensive pets figure among the range of 'products' that mark the 'purrfect economy'.

And images of real-life cats can spawn paid-for digital emojis and stickers for the virtual world. Blogs and videos about pet cats attract advertisers after gathering massive loyal readers/viewers.

Cat-related products and services could set back pet owners such as Huang Weixi by up to 15,000 yuan annually.

However, the national annual spend per pet tends to average out at about 5,000 yuan, according to a report on Dog Network.

Huang, 26, a book editor in Beijing, owns two cats. Last year, her pet bills included cat food worth 1,000 yuan per month, cat essentials, toys and the lot. She paid about 600 yuan to vets for services like washing pets' mouths and brushing their teeth.

"I got used to the companionship of cats since I was very young," she said. "There's no other reason. I just like them. I'm not nuts about dogs or pups."

Most of China's pet owners are young people with a relatively high income and quality educational



An employee dresses a cat in winter clothes in Liaocheng, in East China's Shandong province. KONG XIAOZHENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

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WEN LIANG
Owner of Maosheng Jixiang,
a cat foster care service
provider in Beijing

background, who care for a lifestyle marked by shopping, fashion and entertainment, the Dog Network report said.

Wen Liang, owner of Maosheng Jixiang, a cat foster care service provider in Beijing, said: "With the increase in income, Chinese people now live a better life, so they have begun to care more about their pets, and that care is similar to the way they treat their children. The market is quite alluring."

At Maosheng Jixiang, each cat has a "duplex home" with two floors, a bedroom upstairs and one restroom downstairs.

Nekonomics, a term that originated in Japan in 2015, means consumers will pay for cat-related products and services irrespective of the state of the economy.

There are also wooden tower-like mazes for cats to move from hole to hole, and fish in small ponds to cheer them up.

In a narrow lane off Beijing's Donggong street, Yuan operates a cat cafe that attracts customers well after 9 pm amid sub-zero temperatures.

Couples and groups lounge on European-style seating, sip cappuccino and chat, while cats circle their feet, rub against their legs or jump gently from one table and land softly on the next table in a heart-melting way. This is Beijing's first cat cafe, founded in 2011. Yuan, 38, said he promised his family back then that the venture would at least make both ends meet. The business, he said, has vindicated him.

Compared with traditional cafes, a cat cafe entails additional expenses for owners, in terms of pet food and other necessities. Monthly pet expenses may reach 10,000 yuan.

But cat cafes make profit by selling aspirational or lifestyle foods and beverages to their customers, he said.

Besides, Yuan sells cute kittens through his WeChat account. Each kitten could sell for 2,000 yuan to 3,000 yuan; some rare breeds may command price tags of 5,000 yuan to 6,000 yuan.

"Many of our customers are students and young professionals, who may want to unwind or de-stress here after a long or stressful work day," he said.

Declining to share information like sales revenue and profit figures, Yuan said the cat business is not for everyone as entry barriers, in the form of specialization and limited supplies, are high. "By the way, I don't want more competitors," he said in a lighter vein.

In the digital dimension, cats command fans and revenue. Loulou the cat, on which the lead character of an emoji package was based, had 680,000 fans online.

When Loulou died in October 2017, more than 140,000 read and shared the news, and mourned the cat.

And then there are bloggers who specialize in cat-related topics. A blogger nicknamed Xiaomajia boasts more than 29 million followers on Sina Weibo, China's Twitter-like social media. Each of his posts enriches him by about 20,000 yuan via advertisements.

"Such content resonates well with pet owners who gladly share it with their friends," said Shao Yang, a blogger who previously earned about 1,000 yuan monthly by posting short videos of his pet cat.