

Types of touch lip behavior and their functions in captive Asian elephants

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Elephants have a fission-fusion society centered on the matrilineal groups. To organize their complex society, they use various kinds of social interactions and make relationships. Touch with trunk tip behavior is one of the most characteristic and frequently observed behaviors in elephants, and should be important to make relationship between individuals. However there is no study that revealed their functions. In this study, we aimed to make clear functions of touch with trunk tip behavior between female captive Asian elephants.

We observed Asian elephants at the Elephant Study Center in Ban ThaKlang, Surin province, Thailand. About 200 elephants are registered to the Center. Our subjects were 10 elephants that worked in the Surin Project, a volunteer program to improve living condition of elephants. These elephants go for a walk around the village or spend time at the enclosure in the village for three to six hours a day. During these activities, we recorded actors and recipients of all social interactions, posture during social interactions, and the instructions by mahouts.

We found that elephants showed two types of touch lip behavior depending on the actor's trunk shape. Usually elephants touched others' lips with their trunks U-shaped (type A). Sometimes they showed touch lip behavior with their trunks curved (type B). We found that elephants used type A frequently in excited situation. Elephants showed more aggressive behaviors before or after type B more frequently than before or after type A. Also elephants often showed threat posture during type B. These results suggested that type A is an affiliative behavior while elephants use type B to threaten recipients.