

A NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF GOLDFISH

By G. F. HERVEY

The origin of most domesticated animals is lost in the mists of antiquity. No great uncertainty exists in the case of the goldfish, however; for, though there are some obscure and uncertain references to it being domesticated in the T'ang Dynasty (618-907), we have it on the evidence of three independent Chinese sources that the goldfish was first kept as a pet in China about the beginning of the Sung (960-1279). Early in the eleventh century two Chinese poets praise it in verse, and there is irrefutable evidence to show that by the year 1200 it was being bred at Peking on a commercial scale, and that by 1276 gold, silver, orange, black and mottled fish—such as drive the painter to despair—were being bred and sold in Hangchow.

There is reliable evidence to show that goldfish were introduced into Japan from China about the year 1500. Two centuries later Sato Sanzaemon is reputed to have set up in business at Koriyama as the first Japanese breeder of goldfish, and the business he established has been continuous ever since.

Thereafter the goldfish spread rapidly and widely, and by the end of the seventeenth century it was to be seen in ornamental ponds all over China, Japan and the Indies.

At about the same time, or perhaps a little later, the goldfish reached England, and thence spread over Europe. In 1740 Linnæus at Stockholm received a specimen from the Swedish ambassador at the Danish court. About 1750 the French East-India Company imported some specimens into France, and, rightly or wrongly, they are said to have given great pleasure to the Pompadour. In 1753 or 1754 goldfish were introduced into ponds on two estates in the Netherlands. Before 1755 Horace Walpole gave Count Perron some specimens to take to Italy. About 1780 Count Heyden carried specimens from Holland to Germany. Finally, in Russia in 1791, Prince Potemkin used goldfish in bowls as part of the lavish decorations for a banquet given to his Empress.

America was very late in the field. **The available records** show that the first goldfish to be seen in America were imported from Japan in 1874 by Admiral Ammon, though there is some evidence—but not very convincing—to show that goldfish were on sale in New York about ten years earlier.

The numerous fancy breeds were developed slowly through the ages. The first noticeable difference is a colour variation. As early as 1200 Chinese sources mention goldfish with snow-white bodies and black spots, called Tortoiseshell Fish. Later, by the end of the sixteenth century, there are records of multi-coloured fish being bred in China on a large scale.

Fish with divided tails (Fantails and Veiltails) also date from the sixteenth century; for they are mentioned in a Chinese

book published about 1600, which adds that they were unknown in the Hungch'ih Reign (1485-1505). The fat, short body (so greatly admired by fanciers) may also date from about this time; for a Chinese breeder and fancier, writing in 1596, mentions that the body of a first-class fish should be fat and strong, and a contemporary writer mentions bodies compact and stunted.

The first mention of "scaleless" or calico breeds is to be found in a Chinese book published in 1688, and a Chinese plate, dating from about this time, depicts "calico" goldfish among common goldfish and carp.

About forty years later (1726) a Chinese engraving shows that fish with no dorsal fin had been developed. A scroll—painted at Peking in 1772 and sent to Paris—reveals that the protuberant eye had by then reached a very high state of perfection. The protuberant eye may have been known much earlier, but only may, because the *Notice* that accompanied the scroll implies that fish with protuberant eyes were at this date something special and rather rare.

The nineteenth century saw the decline of the Manchu Dynasty (1644-1912), and with foreign wars and internal rebellions there was a marked deterioration in the "luxury" arts and crafts of China. The development of new breeds of goldfish passed out of the hands of the Chinese mainly into those of the Japanese.

The Lionhead is definitely a Japanese breed, dating from the early nineteenth century; and the Oranda is known to have been first bred in Tokyo in 1840 by crossing a Lionhead and a Veiltail.

As early as 1834 Valenciennes, the French ichthyologist, described a fish that he received from Macao near Hong Kong, and his description of it reveals that it was virtually a Comet. The Comet, as we recognise it to-day, however, is an American development dating from about 1880. It appears to have been bred from imported Japanese stock, and to Hugo Mulertt, one of the first private breeders in America, belongs the honour of being the first to place Comets on the market in quantity.

The Shubunkin, as we now know it, was first bred by the Japanese about 1900. But we have already seen that "calico" goldfish were known to the Chinese a full two hundred years earlier, and since the name *Shubunkin*(*yo*) is only the Japanese *kan-on* (word sound) for the Chinese *Chu-wên-chin*-(*yii*) it may well be that the Chinese knew of an early type of Shubunkin (even if they did not call it by that name) a full two centuries before the Japanese brought Shubunkins to the notice of an admiring world.

It is hardly necessary to add that in one thousand years many other breeds of goldfish have been developed. Indeed, it is reliably estimated that one hundred and twenty-six different breeds of goldfish are now known to experienced fanciers. Few of these breeds, however, have ever been seen outside of the Far East, where they were developed, and they are of interest only to

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the specialist fancier and the student of the history of goldfish.
It would be out of place to mention them here.

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