



A Brief History of
the
Swan Goose
(*Anser cygnoides*)
under
Domestication in
the West

By Jonathan M.
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PART 3

From the early 1840's onwards, American exhibitions of poultry usually included classes and exhibits of both '**African**' and '**Chinese**' or '**China**' geese.

In London in June, 1845, the Zoological Society's 'Exhibition of Domestic Poultry' provided classes for geese to be shown in pairs, and included: "**Q. Asiatic or Knob Geese.**" Unfortunately, this class attracted no entries.¹⁶

America in the 1850's raged with 'Hen Fever'; the development of breeds of large poultry and the attribution of credit for achieving such aims was closely contested, and exhibitions of poultry at the State Fairs were enormously popular.

An authorised American edition of Dixon's *Ornamental and Domestic Poultry* was published, with additional material inserted by J. J. Kerr, in 1851. Introducing Dixon's chapter on '**The China Goose,**' Kerr says: "Of this variety, three beautiful specimens were exhibited at the late Agricultural Show, held in the county of Philadelphia. They were owned by a gentleman, whose name I forget, living in the vicinity of Tacony, near this city."

The image which accompanies the text (Fig.1.) appears to be taken from Nolan (1850), although reversed and grouped with 'Bremen' (=Embden) Geese.¹² The only reason Kerr could have had for copying Nolan's illustration of the '**Large Chinese, or Hong Kong Goose**' to illustrate '**The China Goose,**' is that it best represents the birds he had seen at the Philadelphia Show.

Fig. 1. *Ornamental and Domestic Poultry, 1851.*

Also in 1851, in England, Lord Howe exhibited at the Birmingham & Mid Counties Show: "three good **Brown China geese,**" of which "The weights were extraordinary. The first prize geese (895), weighed 28¼ lbs., 17 lbs., and 15½ lbs. respectively." ¹¹ This report indicates such weights were unusual for the known breed at that time; suggesting the smaller form was the more common type.

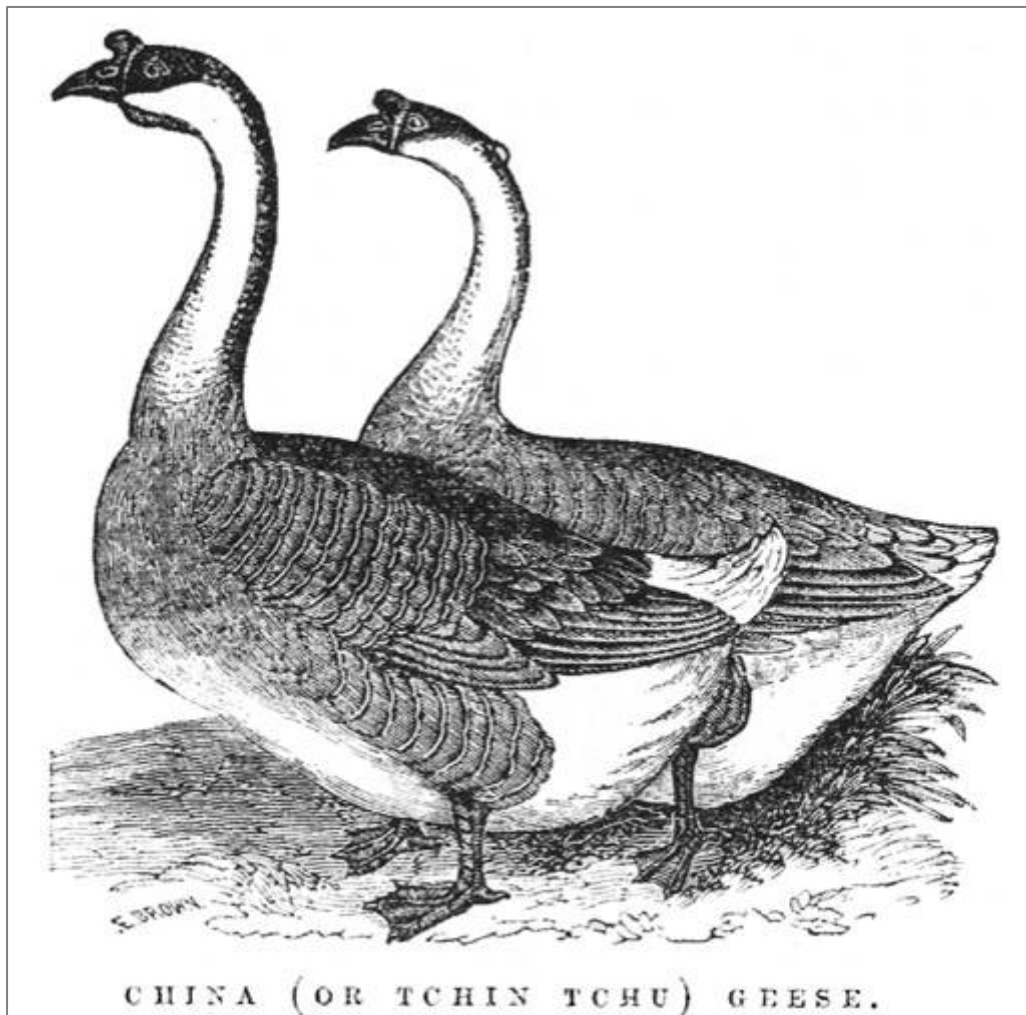
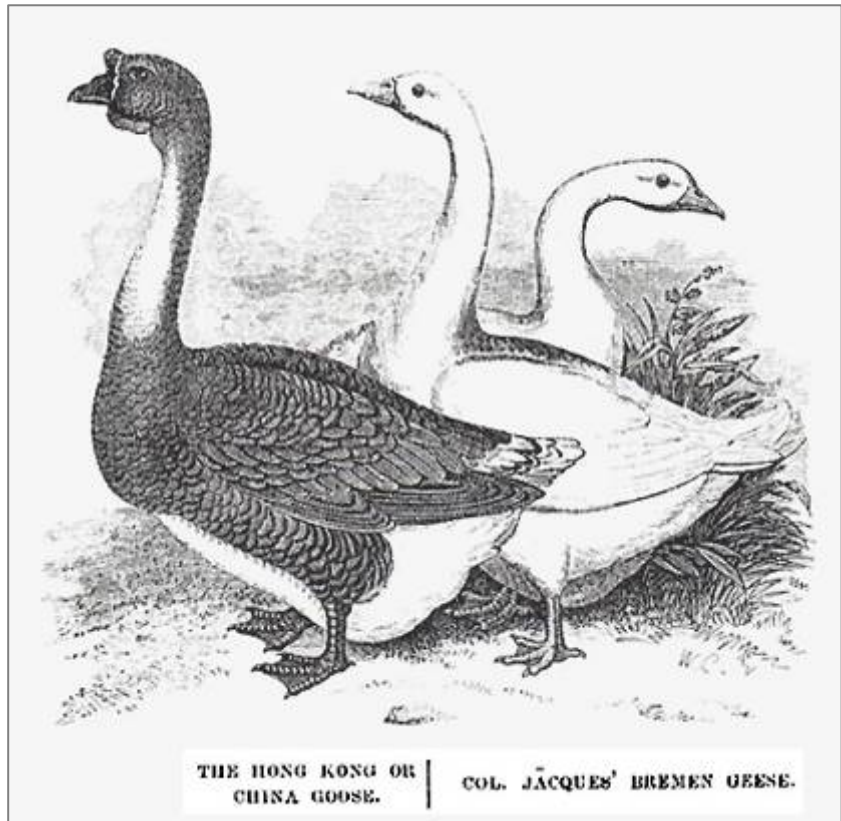


Fig.2.
Domestic Poultry Book
1853.

In America, the large form of '**China**' geese had been bred in a pure state for some years prior to 1851; and "some fine specimens" are reported being exhibited by Mr. C. R. Belcher, of East Randolph, Massachusetts, in 1849.²⁴ Mr. Belcher is stated to have been a successful breeder of "**China (or Tchin Tchu) Geese**" in T. B. Miner's *Domestic Poultry Book* (1853), and furnishes a portrait of his birds (Fig. 2.) and details of their place of origin in a letter dated 13th December, 1852:

"The China Geese, which I have bred for some time past, are generally considered natives of Hong Kong, and are very often named after that place; but those who have been in that region, and have had inducements to observe the fact, concur in stating that there is no ground whatever for the assumption that Hong Kong is their native place. There are no descriptions of tame geese there, and no semi-domesticated or wild varieties that answer the description, in any particular, of the China geese. The breed that I own, which possess great merit, were brought from Tchin Tchu, and have, therefore, the best right to the possession of the euphonious title associating them with the place of their origin. As the cultivation of *hard names* for fowls, has, of late, been greatly in vogue, the correction of this Hong Kong error may be a matter of consequence, entitling me to some credit as its discoverer. Let my deserts be what they may connected with this particular, I am willing to let them abide by the general title, China Geese, which is special enough to designate the variety in question, in my humble opinion, at least."¹⁸

The writer can do no better than quote John Robinson (1924) on the above letter:

"Here we have perfectly good evidence that the "large Chinese Geese" came from China. We also have in this case the only instance where the rural source of an importation of Chinese Geese is mentioned. Tchin Tchu, on modern maps Tsiuenchau [present-day Quanzhou, formerly Chuan Chow], is in the Province of Fukien, opposite the Island of Formosa. . . . Tsiuenchau is situated on the coast a little south of the middle of the coastline, and is about a hundred miles from Foochow, or Fu-Chau, which is one of the largest cities in China, and a great tea market.

. . . America in particular, New York, Philadelphia and Boston have all been headquarters for tea importers since colonial times. Mr. Belcher's business is not stated, but he was evidently in close touch with representatives of tea importers visiting China, and in all probability he was in the tea business, in some capacity, in Boston, of which city East Randolph is a suburb.

The value of Belcher's contribution to Miner's book would seem to have been lost to poultry historians consulting it, because Miner himself did not appreciate it, and failed to differentiate properly the several Chinese types described by others in his book. He describes the large type both as "China," and "Guinea, or African"; and both large and small types as "Chinese." The illustration accompanying Mr. Belcher's letter is of a heavy meat-type goose. Those of the Brown and White "Chinese" geese are of the small upstanding type."²³

Professor Edmund Hoffmann refers to the Belcher letter in his paper (1991) on the **African Goose**; and also states Caleb Bement was responsible for naming it thus, in 1845.¹⁴

Hoffmann located large geese, African in type, in the same region as mentioned in Belcher's account. He cites Smilie's translation of Buffon's work (*q.v.* Part I)

stating: "Buffon's 1793 illustration of an "**African**"- type goose, . . . is evidence for the presence of the **African** goose in England before the **Chinese** variety." In this, Hoffmann is mistaken in assuming that either Buffon or Smilie refer to England in their text, and is equally at error in assuming the Buffon illustration pre-dates others of its kind; regrettably the statement has been repeated in later works. Hoffmann's manuscript does contain a typographical error giving both "Tze tau" and "Tse tau" for the phonetic spelling of the Chinese for "Lion Head"; but this is not so confusing as *Fancy Fowl* (1991)¹⁵ changing the spelling to "Tze tay" in their reproduction of Hoffmann's paper; and thus beginning a series of '*Chinese whispers*,' as this erroneous spelling has, unfortunately, also been repeated in later works, some of which contain different spellings of Hoffmann's name.

Wingfield & Johnston, in their great work, *The Poultry Book* (1853), state:

THE CHINA GOOSE.

The characteristic features of this bird—the black tuberculated bill, and the dark brown stripe that passes down the back of the neck—are of common occurrence, from the result of crosses with Domestic English Geese. At least three varieties have been introduced into this country [England] for some years, —the Red-legged, the Black-legged, and the White Chinese Goose; the two former are identical in the colour of the plumage, and must also bear close affinity to the larger specimens, which, under the name of Hong-Kong Geese, have been more recently exhibited." ²⁶

The last sentence, again, suggests that a 'pure' form of the large **Chinese Goose** was not common in England before the 1850's and, probably, such birds as there were, had existed primarily in a cross-bred state.

In the last edition of Moubray (1854), edited by Meall, much is added to the subject of Chinese Geese and concludes: "The so-called "*Hong Kong*" sub-variety appears to be nothing more than some extraordinarily large specimens of the Grey Chinese Goose, the product of either successful or accidental breeding." ¹⁷ This is, once again, evidence of a large form of **Chinese Goose** being known in England at that date.

Lewis Wright appears uncertain on the subject when he writes of the breed in 1873:

THE CHINESE GOOSE.

— This goose (*Anser cygnoides*), called also the Hong-Kong Goose, the Knobbed Goose (from the protuberance at the base of the bill), and even Spanish Goose, occupies, . . . , a somewhat debatable position between the geese and the swans, both the protuberance just mentioned, and its long neck, giving it a somewhat intermediate character. . . . , it is very widely distributed, ranging over China, great part of Asia, and it is believed even of Africa. . . . In size it is midway between the common goose and the swan, whence it might probably be bred with care to very great weight ; and in one point it has a most decided advantage over all other breeds of geese---viz., in prolificacy.

This author also says: "This goose is found to vary somewhat in colour." and describes the different colour forms, some of which are obviously cross-bred birds; the beak and leg colour varying. Having given size as a characteristic of his "**Chinese Goose**," Wright's final sentence adds further credence to the argument the breed

he describes is derived from the larger, '**African**' type - "Another distinguishing character of the Chinese Goose is a dewlap, or kind of feathered wallet under the throat." ²⁷

In Europe, by 1894, a Frenchman grasps the nature of the breed's origin, although precisely which form he describes is left to speculation: "**The Guinea Goose**, or **Swan Goose**, also known under name **China Goose**, which should be its true name, because it comes from China and not from Guinea. It is grey with a white chest, the tail and the back brownish, the feet orange. It carries on the beak, like swans, a small red tubercle. (Trans. JMT.)" ²⁰

However, another Frenchman, the scientist and veterinarian, Charles Cornevin (1895) ⁹ gives a much wider field of distribution and describes three forms under the collective title = '**Swan-, or caruncled Goose**'; giving synonyms of other authors as: "(**Oie à bosse, Oie de Chine, de Hong-Kong, polonaise, muscovite**)". Cornevin does not include one of the most used synonyms – '**Oie de Guinée**' = **Guinea Goose** – in this list, but states that his small Swan-geese with a black beak, is commonly known as the **Guinea** or **Gambian Goose** according to place of origin; and that he noticed variations in the colour of the birds beaks, caruncle and feet, depending on the colour of their plumage. He states the '**large Swan Goose**' also varies in much the same way, which would indicate mixed blood.

Cornevin gives Blythe's statement (1849) ⁴ that the common domestic goose of India resulted from the inter-breeding of the **Chinese Goose** with the **Grey-lag Goose**; such birds tolerating warmer climates much better than any European goose might do, and were therefore distributed throughout many tropical regions. Be that as it may, the writer cannot concur with Mike Ashton's (2008) ³ speculation of finding either evidence or documentation to link the continent of Africa to geese bearing that name.

Cornevin's report of the importation into France of geese from Madagascar, in 1887, cannot be taken as having any connection with the origin of the name "**African Goose**;" for although a form of the swan goose may have been found in French-governed Madagascar at that period (American and other pirates frequented the island between 1774 – 1824), it must be borne in mind that the name "**African**" had already been adopted and standardised in America some 51 years and 21 years, respectively, prior to Cornevin's writings.

The illustration of **African Geese** (Fig. 3.) in George Howard's *Ducks and Geese* (1897) ¹³ was not popular at the time of its publication, as it was thought to be: "a course bit of work exaggerating the Toulouse lines in the birds." ²³

The reader may judge for them-self. The original photograph, from which the illustration was made, is reproduced in the Reliable Poultry Journal's *Ducks & Geese* of 1900.²¹

Howard's sketch of a pair of African Geese is used by Lewis Wright to illustrate his "**Chinese Geese**" in the 1899 and later editions of *The Practical Poultry Keeper*, stating: "The appearance of the Chinese Goose will be seen from the excellent illustration." ²⁸

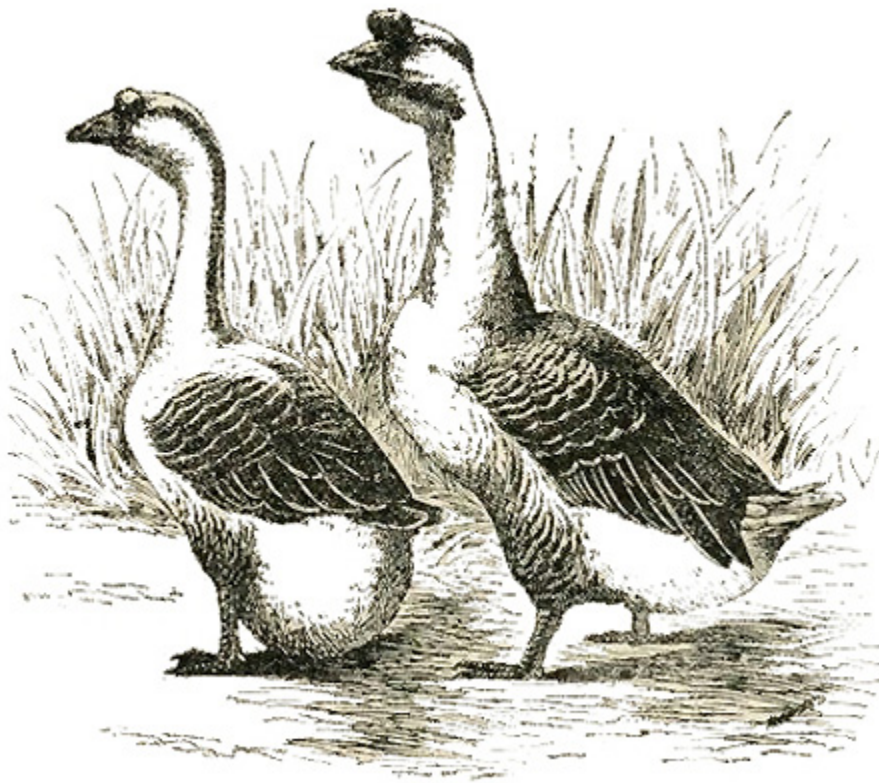


Fig. 3. African Geese, *U.S. Bulletin* 1897.

The first edition of Wright's *Illustrated Book of Poultry* (1873) expresses doubt that a goose of this type is a native of Africa. In the 1902 edition he treats the two Chinese types together under the

heading, "**The Chinese, or African Goose**"; again giving Howard's illustration, but on this occasion captioning it "**African Geese.**"

Wright believes that persistent crossings with the ordinary domestic goose "in India and elsewhere, is the explanation of differences that seem to have puzzled some writers in America, between the "African" goose as there known, and their smaller Chinese." This "**smaller Chinese**" he describes in both its Brown and White varieties; endowing both with a "heavy dewlap under the throat."

Wright further states: "All the known facts and circumstances point to the conclusion that this African goose of America is originally simply a cross of the Chinese with the domestic goose, and especially with the Toulouse." ²⁹

Following Wright in his speculations, Edward Brown (1906) published a photograph of **White Chinese Geese** and the image of **African Geese** from *Ducks and Geese* (1900). He goes one step further in muddling the history of the **African Goose**, when he writes: "Our opinion is that the African was originally the Brown Chinese, that it was taken to Africa by trading-ships, and afterwards to America. Whether the crossing to secure increased size and thicker body took place in Africa or America we do not know; probably the latter." ⁷

The statements of Wright and Brown were so highly regarded, that although neither presents one single shred of evidence, their words were accepted by most to be authoritative. In his early writing even John Robinson (1913) ²² accepts this theory, but upon further investigation explodes it completely. ²³ However, Brown continued to propound his misguided theory in his publication of 1929. ⁸

In addition to the evidence already put forward, where the **African Goose** is recorded in American literature in the early 1840's, the **Toulouse Goose** did not enter into American poultry culture until much later; around 1856, when a few were exhibited at Albany, New York.²³ Furthermore, the early descriptions and illustrations (Fig. 4.) of Toulouse geese relate to birds devoid of a prominent dewlap.

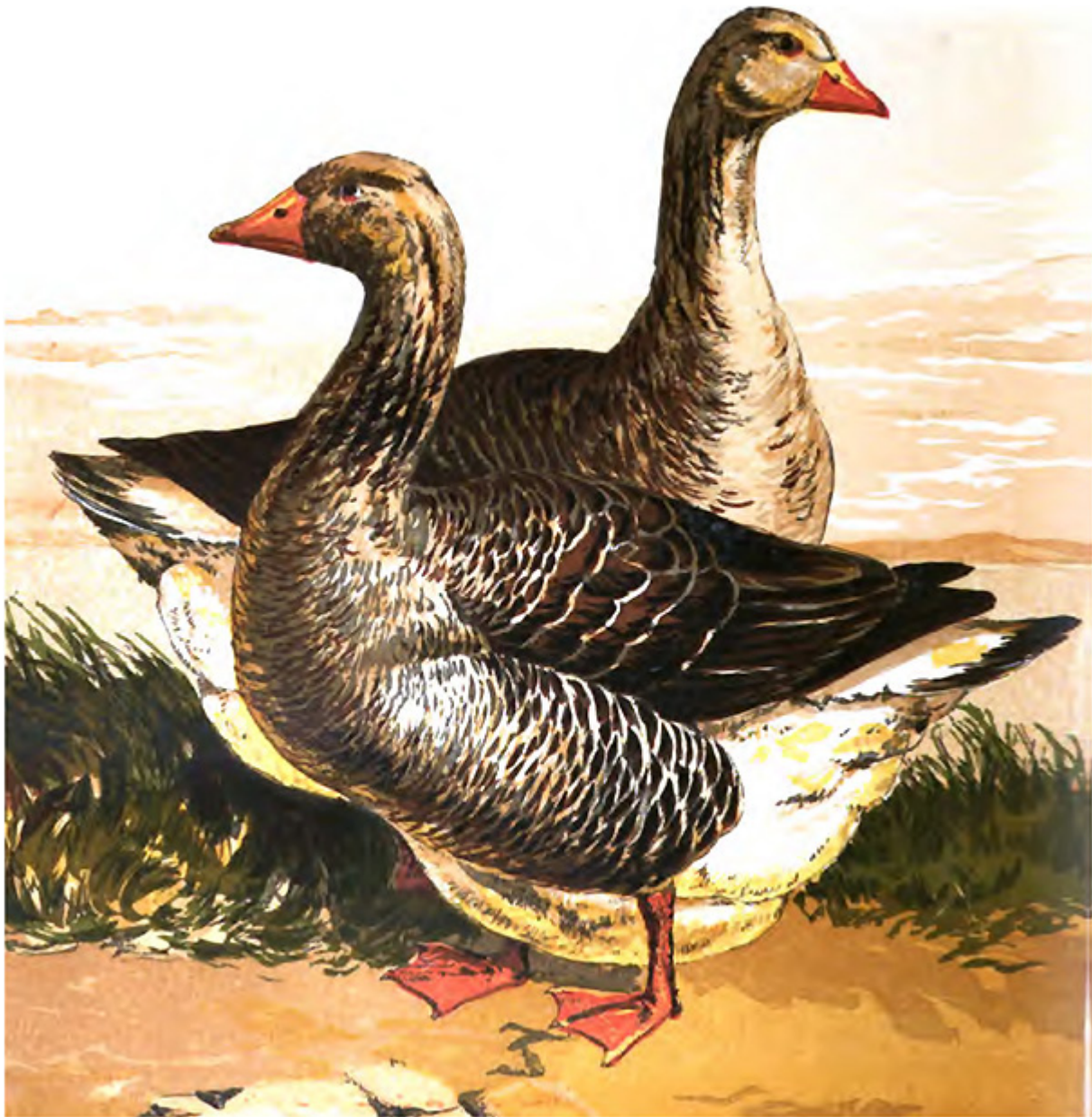


Fig. 4. *The Poultry Book*, 1853.

In recent times numerous inaccuracies have continued to be published on the subject of these Asiatic geese,^{2 & 3} to which the writer responded in a letter (*Waterfowl*, Summer 2006, pp. 42-43) advising the BWA of these errors and providing the earliest known records of Asiatic geese, giving sufficient information for further investigation and the publication of the correct facts. This appears to

have gone unheeded, as evidenced by the continued publication of erroneous information.

The Standards

The first American *Standard of Excellence* (1874) recognised only the **White Chinese Goose** (as a light-weight bird), thereby placing all coloured birds in the **African Goose** class, giving the colour as “grey, darker on the back and wings than on the under-parts and neck,” and indicates that large size is preferred, with the carriage “upright and graceful.” In the revised edition of 1875, the **Brown Chinese Goose** is recognised as the original light-weight variety and placed before the White; in the African’s description the word “stately” is omitted, although the earlier specifications for **African Geese** are retained, and, to further distinguish between the two breeds the colour of the **Brown Chinese** is given as “greyish brown”; a dewlap is specified in the **African** and is prohibited in the **Chinese**.

The 1888 U.S. Standards give the first specific instructions as to the weights of both breeds; the **African Gander** 20 lbs; Goose 18 lbs. and the **Chinese Gander** 16 lbs., Goose 14 lbs. In 1905 the weights for the **Chinese Goose** are amended to 12 lbs. for the Gander and 10 lbs. for the Goose; the weights for the **Africans** are retained as in 1888.

It should be noted that the American Standards then, as now, do not include the place of origin for any breeds.¹

In Continental Europe the smaller ‘**Chinese Goose**’ appears in the descriptive breed lists from 1899 and the French published an illustration of the larger ‘**Oie d’Afrique**’ in the 1920’s.

*Right: Grey Chinese gander.
Photo Denise Moss, 2008.*



Both **Chinese** and **African**

geese are mentioned in the British Standards of the 1920's and '30's as "other breeds of geese occasionally exhibited in this country." The brown and the white varieties of the '**Chinese**' goose eventually appeared in the British Poultry Standards of 1954; the place of origin being omitted. The omission is rectified in the revised British Standards of 1982, which gives; "*Origin: Asia*", presumably with reference to the distribution of the breed's wild ancestors.



*Left:
Pair of White Chinese geese.
Photo: Denise Moss, 2007.*

Following an American importation into Britain in the 1970's, the **Brown** and the **White** varieties of the **African Goose** entered into the British Poultry and Waterfowl Standards of 1982, which gives the place of origin as "Africa." These Standards were re-printed in 1988 and 1994 containing the same imprecision as in the 1982

edition. The 1997 edition finally cites "China" as the place of origin for the **African Goose**; and retains "Asia" for that of the **Chinese Goose**.⁵

The buff variety of the **African Goose** was added by the British Waterfowl Association (BWA) to the Standards of 1999.⁶

The historical content on the Asiatic breeds in the BWA Standards (2008) is, unfortunately, imprecise. In the section on the **African Goose**, the mis-spelled '**Tze Tay**' is corrected to '**Tze Tau**' in the *errata*. However, the text (p.8) infers Eleazar Albin's illustration and description of his "**Moscovian Goose**" represent the **African Goose**, when Albin's geese are clearly cross-bred specimens. The descriptions and illustrations of his '**Moscovian Gander and Goose**' are first published in volume II, p.83, plts.91, 92, 1734; *not* 1738, as given in the Standards (p.18), where repetition of the term "**Moscovian Goose**" as a synonym for the **Chinese Goose** (p.18) is inappropriate. Albin describes and illustrates two separate forms, and gives '**The Spanish Goose, or Swan Goose. Anser cygnoides,**' (volume I, p.87, plt.91, 1731) as a bird clearly bearing a close resemblance to the modern **Chinese Goose** (see ills. Part1.). Although the Rev. Dixon (1848) gives "**Muscovy Goose**" among a great many other synonyms, he was unacquainted with any large and dewlapped form of the **Chinese Goose** and groups all synonyms under the single title of '**China Goose.**'

Earlier writers keep the two forms separate – using the term '**Moscovian**' for the larger '**African**' type.

Also, there were *not* three varieties of **Guinea, Chinese** or **China Geese** at the Zoological Society's gardens in 1848, as stated in the British Standards (p.18). Dixon (1848, pp.114-115) writes he sought the "**White China Goose**", but none were to be located in any collection in London at that time:

"The Zoological Society had parted from their specimens in consequence of being overstocked with other things. Their head keeper seemed only to consider them in the light of a *variety* of the Cygnoides, but he spoke most decidedly of his experience of the permanence, not only of this variety, but also of that of the dark-legged, and the red-legged sorts of the brown kind, thus indicating three races, . . ." ¹⁰

The above paragraph indicates three varieties *had been* known to the keeper in the Gardens at some time, but it cannot be stated that three were present in 1848.

There is further confusion where the Standard for the **African Goose** (p.8.) states Mr. C. R. Belcher's '**Tchin Tchu**' geese were "imported into America as early as 1852"; which is clearly a misunderstanding of the text, as Mr. Belcher had exhibited these birds in 1849, and his letter to T. B. Miner (1853, pp.232-235), dated 13th Dec. 1852, clearly states Mr. Belcher obtained his geese from "**Tchin Tchu**" – modern Quanzhou – and had bred them "for some time past". ¹⁸ This importation was, therefore, *prior* to 1852; and there were imports into America long before 1845, the year in which Caleb Bement adopted the name "**African**" for the large and dewlapped form of '**Chinese**' **Goose**.

John Lawrence (psued. Bonington Moubray, 1822) ¹⁹ tells of live poultry being exhibited along-side dead stock and, therefore, the Poultry Show of 1845, although the first of its kind - being specifically for the display of live birds – was not necessarily the first show at which live birds were exhibited.

Right: African goose.

Photo: Sigrid van Dort, 2010.



Conclusion

Asiatic geese, both of pure race and cross-bred origin, were to be found in Europe from 1676, and probably earlier. Two distinct races were known by 1738, and from that time the races were inter-bred between themselves and also with the common goose of **Gray Lag Goose** descent. The varying forms attracted individual names and this caused confusion in identification of pure-bred stock.

The smaller '**Chinese Goose**' seems to have survived in a more or less pure state throughout the ages, whereas, between circa 1738 – 1840, the large '**African**' type was most commonly found in a cross-bred state. The opening-up of trade with China in the 1840's gave the opportunity for both types of geese to be once again imported into the West in a pure state. America was first to acknowledge the presence of two forms of domesticated Asiatic geese, naming them by 1844, as we know then today, '**Chinese Geese**' and '**African Geese**'. Not until 1902 did some countries of Europe consider these forms as 'breeds'.

Footnote: The original draught of Part 1 was submitted to the BWA for publication in November 2007, and writer respectfully hopes this brief review of the documentary evidence pertaining to the two forms of **Asiatic Geese** – the **Chinese** and the **African** – will go some way in presenting the true facts surrounding the *mystery* of their entry into European and American poultry culture.

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Below: pair of African Geese. Photo: Sigrid van Dort, 2010.

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