

# The Pekingese and The Happa Dog

*A remote British museum reveals enlightening clues to Pekingese origins*

by Tony Rosato Article first published in 1998

Philosophers have a saying which goes "As soon as you learn all the answers to all the questions, they change all the questions!" which of course is a way of reminding us that we never stop learning.

I certainly found that to be the case during a stay in England when I paid a visit to The Walter Rothschild Zoological Museum situated in the small quiet village of Tring -- about 30 miles Northwest of London -- and made an eye-opening discovery.

Dog lovers willing to make the pilgrimage to the Tring museum will get an up-close look at the remarkable collection of 88 breeds of dogs most dating back to the first decade of the 20th century. The museum's

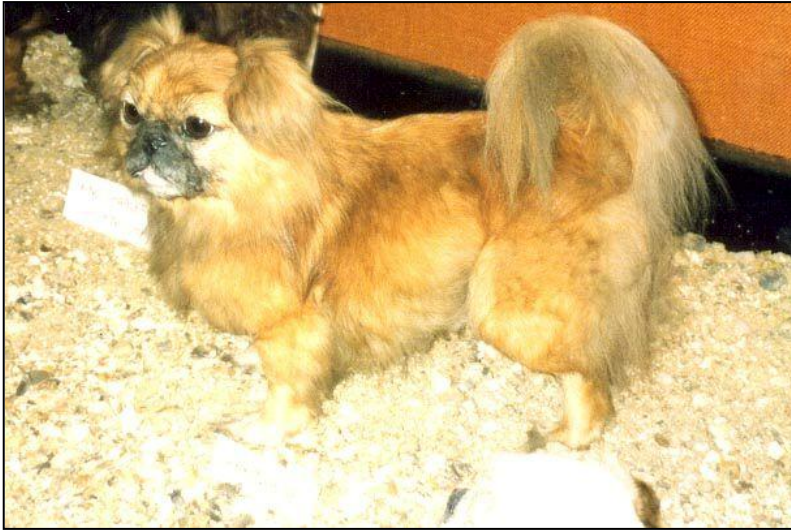
fascinating dog collection was moved out to Tring from London in 1968 after being hidden away from public view a long time. The collection displays some little known breeds and some of the finest representatives of The Kennel Club's and AKC's recognized breeds known a century ago.

As one would expect, some breeds have changed considerably in appearance while others have changed very little, such as the Japanese Chin -- or Japanese Spaniel as it was called until 1977. Exhibition labels accompany each exhibit and explain its history.



For example, the label next to the Japanese Spaniel reads "*Shown for the first time in England in 1862. Ancient origin and closely related to the Pekingese. Male. Presented by Sir William Ingram. Bred in Japan. Imported to France. Died 1905. Said to be the finest dog of its breed in Europe.*"

Remarkably, the Chin in the museum cabinet looks good enough to win big in the ring today. But you couldn't say that about the preserved 19th century Pekingese standing next to him. That Peke happens to be a famous one called "Ah Cum." He's considered the "Dog Adam" or founding stud dog of Pekingese in the Western World which virtually every Peke in the show ring today world-wide claims as its ancestor.



### **Ah Cum about 1905**

Ah Cum was just a year old when he was imported to England in 1896 directly from the Forbidden City in Beijing along with another Peke. Historical accounts relate that several other 19th century Pekingese imported from the Forbidden City during the late 19th and early 20th centuries weighed roughly between 3-9 pounds, the first of which began arriving in England in 1860

and later America. But Ah Cum was considered one of the best of that period and his stud work marks a starting point in recorded pedigrees for the breed which is why he's mentioned and often pictured in a number of early breed books.

The exhibition label next to Ah Cum states that he was imported by one of the breed's pioneers, Mrs. T. Douglas Murray, became a champion in 1904 and died the following year.

Pekingese fanciers are lucky to have one of the earliest and actual foundation dogs of the breed preserved for posterity in the Rothschild Museum, and it is certainly interesting to see how drastically the breed has changed in 100 years. Or so I thought.



Ah Cum stands at the very end of a 75 ft. glass walled case in the museum, right next to the Chin, some "Charlies" -- Cavalier King Charles Spaniels (or English Toy Spaniels as they are known in the U.S.), and a unique small dog that has faded into obscurity and astounded me when I first noticed him called *the Chinese "Happa" dog.*

**L-R, Ah Cum, Japanese Chin and Happa Dog, late 19<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> century**



If I expected to learn something about the history of Pekingese by seeing the founding sire of the breed, Ah Cum, it was the Happa dog that was the eye-opener --- because the Happa dog's type, proportion and overall construction were far more familiar to me as a Peke breeder and appeared far more like the Pekingese we know today than the breed's well documented patriarch standing next to him.

The smooth coat factor on the Happa dog was a non-issue in my view because as we all know, many breeds produce in two coat varieties, smooth vs. long, rough or wire coat, including Chows, Chinese Shar-Pei, Chihuahuas, Fox Terriers, for example. Even in the early days Pugs produced in two coat varieties -- smooth and rough -- and Queen Victoria had the rough variety in her kennels. It turns out that Pekingese also had smooth and long coat varieties back then too, but the smooths were bred out of the gene pool soon after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

There are a number of good accounts of breeding activity of the early Pekingese breeders in England and America, though one thing always remained unclear. People wondered how British breeders -- who are credited with a major role in developing the modern Pekingese -- were able to produce a compact, barrel chested, heavily coated Peke with short, heavy boned, well bowed forelegs using late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century breeding stock that was more upstanding, often with longer, narrow bodies, with little or no bow whatsoever in their forelegs.

The assumption had always been that Pekingese breeders of yesteryear developed the breed "from within" -- through inbreeding -- which allegedly produced atavism, or "throwbacks" to hidden characteristics. Or the thinking was, perhaps there were mutations which could explain the expression of some traits and the evolution of the breed's appearance. Nobody ever really questioned it.

But a more logical, even obvious, answer to the mystery lies hidden in the Rothschild Museum in Tring with the ancient Happa dog "Ta-Jen" whose "Pekingese" characteristics are more typical, more recognizable, and positively more likely than the breed's recorded patriarch, Ah Cum.

The Happa dog exhibits typical traits for the breed as we know it today. He has the correct body shape for a modern Pekingese with barrel rib and is low to ground. He has a bowed front, not straight forelegs like Ah Cum presented next to him for comparison. The Happa's broad shallow head, large wideset eyes and earset level with the top skull are more typical of a modern Pekingese than Ah Cum. The obvious atypical traits are the Happa's short tail and faulty tail carriage. But these are anomalies that remain a remote factor in the modern Pekingese gene pool and represent traits that can be improved or "corrected" in one generation. From my perspective as a longtime Pekingese breeder, seeing the Happa dog was like "coming home" and filled in a key missing piece of the Pekingese evolutionary puzzle.

In 1898, just two years after Ah Cum was imported to England, the first Pekingese standard was adopted by the Japanese Spaniel Club in England while Pekes at that same time were called Pekingese Spaniels. Soon after, a distinction was made between the two kinds of spaniels -- "Japanese" and "Pekingese" -- prior to the formation of The Pekingese Club of

England in 1904, just five years before The Pekingese Club of America was founded. It was about the time the American parent club was incorporated that the Happa Dog appeared on the scene in the UK while the Pekingese craze was coming of age in New York's elite social circles. So, was the Happa "Ta-Jen" the right dog in the right place at the right time to shape the development of the modern Pekingese phenotype?

If this particular Happa dog did have more of a direct influence on the modern Peke's distinctive breed characteristics, how is it that we haven't heard more about him in the accounts of breed history? Why did "Ta-Jen" remain in obscurity and eventually fade from memory, even though many of his characteristics are recognized in the breed today?

For one thing, Tajen the Happa dog stood in a London museum that sustained heavy damages from bombings during W.W.II. Quite a number of the dogs in the museum's collection were destroyed (or disappeared, including some Pekingese) and the rest of the collection went into storage for nearly 20 years immediately after the war. Then, in 1968, the collection was restored and re-opened to the public in the tucked-away village of Tring.

Many Peke breeders in Britain today would not have seen or known about Ah Cum or the Happa dog in London before W.W. II. No one had seen either dog after the museum's dog collection was moved to Tring. But that's not surprising. Just ask any resident New Yorker if they've ever gone inside the Statue of Liberty or to the top of the Empire State Building and the answer is likely to be "Never." So, we can easily understand why the Happa Dog remained in virtual obscurity from the time he became a preserved museum exhibit around 1912.

The exhibition label for the Happa Dog reads "*Known in China since 700 BC. Probably the basic breed from which the Pekingese was developed and perhaps also ancestral to the Pug. 'Ta-Jen', male, imported from Peking 1906, died 1912. Presented by the Hon. Mrs. Carnegie.*"



### **Happa dog Ta-Jen imported from Peking 1906**

Considering the Happa dog's smooth coat factor and other traits, it's easy to see how he and his ancestors are related to the Pug. Yet while I observed the differences between the two very different ancient preserved "Pekes" in the Tring museum, a British breeder of champion Working dogs approached me and very matter-of-factly commented on how the offspring of the Happa dog and Ah Cum were crossed, saying "and that's how we got the modern Peke!" That breeder's

nonchalance and astuteness took me aback because in my years of breeding, exhibiting and judging Pekes I had never heard that theory before and had just been considering that likelihood myself.

**B**ut this Happa dog's history *was* recorded and he was an important dog in his day. The 1912 book titled *The Pekingese* by Miss Lillian Symthe (a.k.a. "Lady Betty") contains two photos of Ta- Jen as a youngster and refers to him as "the smooth dog." The book claimed that this "unique little Happa dog" was the only one known in England and represented the true type of Chinese Sleeve Dog. The book also stated that the dog was "Bought by the Hon. Mrs. Lancelot Carnegie whilst at H.B.M's Legation at Peking," a designation which no doubt helped in acquiring the dog.



**Ta-Jen and Li-Tzu the Gold Medal winner with Mrs. Carnegie's Chinese maid, Shen Ah Nu**

Around the same time that Mrs. Carnegie brought the Happa dog to England she also imported a black Peke from Beijing named Li-Tzu who became the Gold Medal winner of The Pekingese Club (UK) in 1907 for Top Winning Pekingese of the year.

Given the fact that Mrs. Carnegie was a top exhibitor at the time and brought in the only known Happa dog to England and France, one wonders what interest this unusual dog stirred among other leading Peke breeders then. As the British breeder at the museum suggested, did Mrs. Carnegie and some of her contemporaries cross the Happa dog with their other Pekes to acquire the Happa dog's breed type, the bowed front, broad flat topskull and earset on their future stock?

A closer look at some earlier history of Happa dogs reveals more interesting clues to the origin of Pekingese and their development in ancient China, particularly in how the breed relates genetically to other Asian toy breeds.

According to one of the most definitive and highly respected sources on the history of Asian dogs, *Dogs of China and Japan in Nature and Art* by V.W.F. Collier, published early 20th century, the term "Happa Dog" was used by the Chinese for virtually any small lap dog of any breed. "Happa" was the Manchu word for "limp, or roll in the walk," with of course the roll (hopefully not the limp) being regarded as typically characteristic of the Pekingese gait.

A Mr. Laufer in his *Annals of Shantung Province* wrote about small lap dogs in Tibet in the late 19th Century referring to them as "low, small, clean and cunning, with which you can play, called a Happa Dog."

If we delve into the breeding practices of the Chinese eunuchs and Buddhist monks who for centuries were responsible for producing valued characteristics in dogs and cats in palaces and monasteries, it's clear these breeders freely practiced crossbreeding. For example, Collier states in his writings "In China, the breed (Shih Tzu) is nowadays sometimes crossed with Pekingese with a view to introducing length of coat to that breed.

Then too, in Britain in 1952, a Kennel Club sanctioned Peke/Shih Tzu cross was conducted officially for the purpose of modifying Shih Tzu breed type. As we all know, breeds were created and improved through crossbreeding, so it's no stretch of the imagination to presume that official Peke/Shih Tzu cross -- which took place over several generations -- very likely produced crossbreeds that quietly made their way into the hands of clever Peke breeders who, looking for a competitive edge, easily added longer coat to future generations of show stock, albeit off the record.

Anyone who is aware of the unofficial but well established practice of crossbreeding that went on in the Terrier world in Britain, for example, can easily put this into perspective. There is the well known story of an English champion Lakeland Terrier that later also got its champion title as a Welsh Terrier, getting one challenge certificate in both breeds from the same judge.

In earlier days, the Kennel Club in England accepted registrations from unknown parentage – to say nothing of the fact that pedigrees and registration applications through the years were based solely on the honor system. DNA parentage identification and verification didn't have an impact on registration policy anywhere in the dog world until the mid 1990s, and that was in the U.S. when the American Kennel Club introduced the policy which now applies to all frequently used sires and dams registered with AKC.

**W**hen the Asian breeds first began their regular influx into Britain in the mid 19th century, these dogs were a miscellaneous mixture of a number of breeds. So British breeders were accustomed to this and clearly had their work cut out for them in sorting out the traits and genes.

In China there was no taboo associated with continual crossbreeding and of course the practice produced a variety of types. It's understandable then why the Chinese would have been inclined to use a generic, catch-all term such as "Happa" for a small lap dog of any kind. The distinction between breeds in many instances would have been blurred, and even some of the best dogs which approached the ideal would not have necessarily bred true, although it was said the Japanese Spaniel was more likely to breed true than the Pekingese.

Because the Asian culture is steeped in mysticism, one of the highest priorities in breeding in ancient China was the production of dogs with special markings which had symbolic significance and great value. In particular, the white forehead blaze was highly prized as “a superior mark of Buddha,” which the Chinese called "a little ball shining like snow between the eyebrows." It could be for this reason alone that many of the dogs depicted in ancient Chinese artwork exhibit parti-color traits which Ta-Jen also exhibits.

Although Ta-Jen is not a parti-color, he actually displays a sizable white parti-color blaze on his forehead which is fully visible in the 1912 photo of him as a young dog in Lillian Smythe's book mentioned earlier. This is an indication that the dog was highly valued according to Chinese culture. His white forehead marking faded somewhat with age, though is still perceptible in the museum. He also has (barely perceptible) stripes throughout his coat as seen in Bulldogs, Boxers and other breeds.





## Happa dog Ta-Jen in the Rothschilds Zoological Museum in Tring

Considering the value that Chinese mysticism placed on parti-color markings, it's clear why ancient Chinese art often depicts Pekingese as parti-colors. But it's interesting to note that both Japanese Chin breeders and Pekingese breeders equally claim the very same images in ancient Chinese art to be representations of their own breeds and proof of ancient origin. But as we can see from looking at a 19th century photo of the two Japanese Chin and a Pekingese owned by Queen Alexandra (queen consort to King Edward VII of England), it's obvious that the distinction between these two breeds was not as clearly defined as it is today.



## Queen Alexandra's Pekingese and two Chin

To add to the ambiguity, in past centuries Pugs in China produced in all colors -- even parti-color. So with respect to which breed is depicted in ancient Chinese artwork, even though modern Chin and Peke breeders believe it's their breed, it may be that these paintings merely depict generic dogs that could easily

be called anything from "parti-color Pugs" to "smooth coated Shih Tzus" to "parti-color Happas" to rough coated versions of any of them.

In 1867, a Dr. W. Lockhart wrote that "a small black-and-white, long-legged, pug-nosed, prominent-eyed dog was one of the two kinds of *Pugs* in China," which, if the dog were rough coated, sounds as though it could have been a reference to a Japanese Spaniel since Pekingese at that time were also known as Pekingese Pugs.

Mr. Collier writes about a short-coated dog in 19th Century China known as a "Dragon Claw Pug" which was very low to the ground with long feathering on the ears, legs and tail, with the tail being very curly. That breed has supposedly been extinct for over 150 years, but the traits clearly correlate to those seen in early Pekingese in England at the beginning of the 20th century. Even today it's still common to see curly tails in Pekes as well as a kink in the end of the tail in some lines -- traits associated with Pugs (curl) and Lhasas (kink in tail).

We also sometimes see Pekes or Lhasas with black tipped tongues today, which can only have come from distant crosses to the Chow Chow. The reason? In late 19th Century China, the opinion was held that Pekingese with spotted tongues were more marketable to the Europeans.

**E**ven though the Pekingese gene pool appears segregated today, the expression of traits from crosses long ago to other related breeds comes through. The point of course is that *individual genes endure indefinitely* --- which is exactly why captured genes from an outstanding prepotent stud dog or brood bitch can be so valuable through so many generations.

It is amazing that the Happa dog remained hidden for so many years, and at the same time somewhat ironic that this single long-forgotten dog could have had more influence on the modern Pekingese gene pool than anyone today ever imagined.

But if anything, the story of the unique, hidden-away Happa brings into focus a notion filled with possibilities and promise that goes to the heart of breeding programs everywhere throughout the dog show world -- that being, the difference just one breeding or a single dog can make through many generations -- and maybe even to the long-term future of a breed.



**Tony Rosato viewing Ah Cum and Happa Dog  
at the Walter Rothschilds Zoological Museum, Tring, England**