

# DRAGON BOAT

## CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The *Duanwu Jie* – Dragon Boat Festival celebrates the life and especially the death of Qu Yuan (c. 340 -278 BC), the first great Chinese poet who lived during the period of the Warring States (481 – 221 BC) – a time when China was divided into several kingdoms which were constantly at war with each other, each seeking supremacy over the other.

Qu Yuan was a high-ranking Mandarin (official), a Minister of Law and Ordinance of the Kingdom of Chu, in southern China. The Kingdom of Chu was under siege by the warriors of Qin, a kingdom in the north which was determined to control it.

The King of Qin offered a peace treaty to the King of Chu, a treaty that was never intended to be honoured. Qu Yuan, suspicious of the Qin motives, advised the King of Chu not to accept the treaty. Unfortunately for him and behind his back, treacherous officials, fearing his growing importance to the King, slandered him and led the King of Chu to believe that Qu Yuan was being traitorous to the Chu's kingdom. The King signed the treaty. Qu Yuan was dismissed by the King and sent on exile to a remote region of the Hunan Province.

On the fifth day of the fifth lunar month of the Chinese calendar in the year 278 BC, while in exile. Qu Yuan heard of the fall of the Kingdom of Chu, that the capital had fallen into the hands of the Qins. In despair, and in the ultimate expression of love of his country, Qu Yuan, weighted down with a rock, threw himself into the Miluo River (in present day Hunan Province) and drowned.

According to legend, when news of his drowning became known, boats were launched by the local fishermen in a race to be first to recover Qu Yuan's body. Thus dragon boat racing was born. The furious splashing of paddles and banging of drums used these days to get the crews in time has its origin in the fishermen's bid to scare off fish and other river creatures from defiling his body.

In one version of the legend, the fishermen began throwing rice into the river as an offering to Qu Yuan, so that his spirit could be nourished in the next world. But one night, Qu Yuan appeared in a dream to one of the fishermen, telling him that the fish were eating the rice offerings, that to prevent it, the rice ought to be wrapped in silk – later replaced by bamboo leaves – to protect the offerings.

A second version, was that rice was thrown into the river to entice the river creatures away from Qu Yuan's body, to prevent the creatures from defiling their hero.

Creatures in the river, perhaps crocodiles, may have appeared, looking like the mythological dragons of Chinese folklore. Was the head of the dragon boat modelled after a glimpse of a crocodile head. Perhaps the idea of a boat in the form of a dragon represented the Dragon Spirit, the Guardian of the Water, who joined in the search was indicative of the greatness of Qu Yuan.

Whichever the version and the association with the dragon, Qu Yuan's ultimate sacrifice gave birth to dragon boat races

The *Duanwu Jie* – Dragon Boat Festival is the third largest festival in the Chinese calendar, coming behind Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) and the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival. Like all things celebrated in Chinese tradition, food plays an important and symbolic part, thus the partaking of glutinous rice dumplings / *changs* / *zongzi* / *doongs* at the annual festival originated for the offerings made by people to the river creatures to secure the release of Qu Yuan's body.

To the millions of Chinese people, the Festival is a reaffirmation of Chinese values based on the teachings of Kong Fu Tzu (Confucius) principally that of Respect for the Elders, Obedience of the Emperor (State) and the Practice of Filial Piety. The festival is celebrated every year on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> Moon (month) of the Chinese lunar calendar. The launch of a dragon boat and the practise of making offerings of *Changs*, often referred to as *Zongzi's* or *Doongs* (rice cakes wrapped in bamboo leaves) is an extremely important part of the Festival. For the gourmet, it is encouraging to note that the culinary treat is still widely practised among Chinese communities all over the world.

Cont.

## **CEREMONIAL PROCEDURE**

### **For Traditional Launching Of A Dragon Boat**

The following is a Ceremonial Procedure For a Traditional Launching of a Dragon Boat modified from an essay written by Edward Lee, South West Chung Wah Association

The ceremonial procedure has its background in ancient Chinese beliefs and practices. Outside mainland China and centres of Chinese population, the significance of the annual festival is largely, unfortunately, overshadowed by the combative and colourful highlight of the festival – the sport of racing dragon boats itself.

The earthiness of the sport in contrast to the highly regulated and regimented modern sports of today and the attendant carnival like atmosphere of the festival has resulted in dragon boat racing in one form or another now being held all over the world.

In some instances, the dragon has been replaced with mythical creatures of the host nation. Similarly, the original Taoist ceremony central to the Festival have been adapted to depict folklore, aligned to local customs, and allay political and nationalistic sensitivities. In many so called dragon boat festivals, very little of the Chinese cultural identity remains nor is there much information given on the origins and hence the significance of the festival.

The procedure and explanation given below is mostly based on available text on the subject and observations of this ceremony being conducted in Penang, Singapore and Hong Kong, the three best known venues in the world today outside China where the festival is celebrated every year.

Before the commencement of racing, the permission of the guardian spirits must first be sought in order to avoid bad luck befalling and to bestow good fortune to those taking part in the racing. This is a highly ritualized ceremony which is left usually to a Taoist priest as strict protocol needs to be observed in order not to cause offence to any one of many spirits. It may also be performed by a Taoist elder should a priest not be available. Although Dragon Boat is a Taoist Festival, blessings can often be performed by Buddhist Monks.



**Launch of a dragon boat and making offerings of roast pork, roast duck, steamed chicken and fresh fruit, is an extremely important and an integral part of the Festival**





**In China and many Asian Countries the offering of Roast Pork as a traditional sacrificial ritual has continued as a part of the Taoist Blessing Ceremony for the Dragon Boat Festival.**



**Blessing and prayers by Taoist / Buddhist Priest is a very important part in acknowledgement of and asking permission from the Guardian Spirit to hold the Dragon Boat Regatta, seeking good fortune and blessings on the participants and the organisers.**



## **Dotting Of The Eye Ceremony**

Once permission is obtained (rarely withheld due to the generosity of offerings made), the dragons need to be awoken and sight given, hence the Dotting of the Eye ceremony.

In its simplest form, this is performed by painting into the Dragon's eye the pupil while accompanied by banging of drums and cymbals. This task is usually performed by an elder or a highly respected member of the community and these days can be bestowed to the Major Sponsor or several outstanding supporters of the Dragon Boat fraternity.

However should the Dragon Boat be a new boat, one that has never been raced before, the Boat should have a special Eye Dotting Ceremony where the "Wisdom Eye is Dotted", located in the centre of the forehead.

This can then be followed by the offering of prayers and the blessing of the boat and crews taking part in the festival. This could take the form of sprinkling of holy water and the scattering of yellow rice. In the past, at the conclusion of the Festival, a similar ceremony of thanking the water spirits is performed, concluding with the symbolic act of laying the Dragon to rest until next Festival.

This last ceremony is rarely performed these days due to the fact that the Dragon Boats are now used throughout the year and not brought out just for the Dragon Boat Festival. However, this ceremony can still be performed to appease the guardian spirits after Major Events such as the Dragon Boat Festival or National or World Championships.



**Dragon Boat Blessings can also be performed by Buddhist Monks**



**"Eye Dotting" Ceremony is performed by respected members of the community**



***Changs*, also known as *Zongzi* or *Doongs* (rice cakes wrapped in bamboo leaves) are thrown into the water to appease the Dragon Spirit. This is an extremely important part of the Festival. It is encouraging to note that this culinary treat is still widely practiced among Chinese communities all over the world.**



## CHINESE LION DANCE

The Chinese Lion Dance is often called upon at Dragon Boat Festivals not only to provide entertainment and a cultural display. It plays a very important part in expelling evil spirits along with the Blessing Ceremony.

The Lion Dance is also called “Game of the Lion” which, in its true form, is a demon expelling ritual. In the early Eastern Han Dynasty (AD25-AD220), emissaries from the Kingdom of Ancient Persia brought lions to the court as tribute. Because Lions are not indigenous to China, the “Kings of the Beasts” were highly valued. These rare and powerful animals eventually took on a mythical aura and became symbolically associated with purity and protection

With choreographic innovations incorporated into the dance during the Tang Dynasty, this performance became increasingly vivid and expressive. Observe the stretching and scratching of the lion as it wakes, how it revels in life prancing around, and the way it marks its territory to protect it from demons.

Today the lion dance is mainly performed at auspicious occasions such as Chinese New Year, shop openings, house openings, religious occasions, Dragon Boat festivals.



**Lion Dances are performed to expel any evil spirits that may harm a Dragon Boat Regatta.**



**These rare and powerful animals were highly valued and symbolically associated with purity and protection.**



**A respected community member makes an offering to appease the Lion at a Dragon Boat Festival**



**The very important sponsors of Dragon Boat Regattas are often delighted to be involved with the cultural aspects of the sport.**

## SUMMARY

The Dragon Boat Festival of Qu Yuan, has its origin on the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC. It is an important Chinese Festival.

It falls on the "Double Fifth", the fifth day of the fifth moon in the Chinese Lunar Calendar. It is one of the three days in the Lunar Year when all debts must be settled. It is also the time to pay homage to ancestors and to appease the dragon, controller of the waters, ensuring adequate rains to ripen the crops. The most exciting part of this traditional festival, however involves the Dragon Boat Races.

The Races are held to commemorate the death of Qu Yuan, the legendary Chinese poet and patriot who lived during the Chu Dynasty. He held a high position in the court of one of the major states of China but was eventually exiled by corrupt government officials.

Qu Yuen wrote many poems expressing his great love for his country and his people, lamenting his own fate. As a final protest against the government, Qu Yuen cast himself into the Miluo River.

The local fishermen were so moved by his gesture that they raced in their boats to try and recover his body, beating the water with paddles to prevent the fish and other river creatures from devouring him. They also threw rice dumplings into the water to nourish his spirit. To prevent river creatures from eating the rice offerings, the dumplings, were wrapped in silk bound with five threads in the colour (red, blue and yellow) of the emperor.

The Dragon Boat Festival over the past decade and a half is still evolving as a sport, which has captured the imagination of the world by storm. The sport is fastest growing water sport in the world and the International Dragon Boat Federation (IDBF) is trying its best to set international standards to ensure the on going development of the sport.

However, the Dragon Boat Festival, upon which the sport is based, has its traditions and beliefs that have come from a history of over 2000 years.

These traditions and beliefs are extremely important to the people of Chinese heritage and a strong demonstration of respect by dragon boat paddlers for the tradition will be appreciated by those whose traditions we are part of.

Written and compiled by Richard Lim.

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Photographs Courtesy of Austin Chin

**Web:** <http://www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/history/zhou/eastern/quyuan.htm>

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