



The Summer Dragon Boat Festival

Compiled and Edited by

Geoff Walker

Dragon Boat racing has developed into one of Hong Kong's most popular summer events which takes place annually around the month of May or June at the outset of summer. The races are highly competitive and held at various locations within Hong Kong. However, Dragon Boat racing has now development into an international occasion and is celebrated in some of the world's capital cities, especially in those with ethnic Chinese communities, and which has become a public holiday.

A Dragon Boat takes the form of a long narrow boat, propelled by oars. Each boat has a decorative Dragon at the bow with scales painted along the sides, with a tail at the stern. Usually there are two categories of Dragon Boats that enter competitions. The Standard Dragon Boat is crewed by 1 drummer, 18 paddlers and 1 coxswain to steer the boat, whilst the smaller version has 1 drummer, 10 paddlers and 1 coxswain

The Dragon Boat races are a very colorful, cheerful, and boisterous experience for spectators, which highlights athleticism and teamwork. The point to point race takes the form of teams of paddlers all paddling furiously to the beat of a drum, with the drummer sitting in the bow of the boat, all of which contribute to an exciting and spectacular event. A typical race is 500 meters in distance and can take 2-3 minutes depending on the quality of the paddlers. Some festivals include races of 200-500 meters and the ultimate "guts and glory" race of about 2000 meters. It is claimed that the winners of the various competitions will enjoy good luck and happiness the following year.

Dragon boat racing dates back some 2,500 years, originating among fishing communities along the Yangtze River and in Southern-Central China. it was initially a folk ritual designed to pay homage to the rain gods in attempts to encourage rainfall and mark the occasion of the summer rice planting season.

The Dragon Boat Festival is linked to the myth of Qu Yuan, who was a poet and high-ranking Mandarin who was banished by a warring and corrupt regal official. Upon hearing his court had been sacked by his enemies the poet drowned himself out of sorrow. Allegedly, this prompted villagers to take to their boat with drums out onto the river in attempts to rescue him. They threw dumplings into the water to attract the fish and prevent them eating the poet's corpse. Unfortunately, they were never able to locate him. This occurred on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, now known as Tuen Ng Festival, during which traditional sweet and sour dumplings are eaten.

The traditional dumplings take the form of glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo leaves as seen below. However, in modern times the dumplings cover a wide range of tastes and span from the sweet to the savory. Generally, in northern China, people like eating sweet zongzi dumplings with red bean and dried

jujube paste, whilst those from the southern parts of China prefer their zongzi dumplings savory and filled with fatty pork and green bean paste.



However, dragon boat racing fell out of favor during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The practice was associated with feudal superstitions and was deemed an outdated custom with the revolutionary spirit of the Chinese Communist Government of the time. Hence, Chinese dragon boat racing was banned by them and its popularity was severely curtailed. However, it was not completely eradicated as subsequent experience has shown

Finally, in 1976 dragon boat racing was resumed, starting when the Hong Kong government (then under British rule), began to promote the sport once again to assist in boosting tourism. Thus, began the modern era of the Dragon Boat Festival. During 1991, the International Dragon Boat Federation (IDBF) was formed along with a set of rules and regulations governing the sport. Nowadays, Dragon Boat racing is practiced in over sixty countries around the world, including China, who boasts 50 million dragon boaters. The Hong Kong Dragon Boat Festival draws thousands of participants from different countries around the world, every summer when the festival is celebrated.



The highly organized and nowadays professional line-up, for the start of a Dragon Boat Race in Hong Kong. Different International Teams compete for the honors, and it is an extremely competitive event which attracts many nationalities and international sponsors.

According to some Chinese mythology, controlling the dragons gives one the power to control rivers and rainfall, which may be particularly useful during the hot summer. Great care is taken in carving dragon heads onto the bow of dragon boats, in a manner to please the river dragons and to prevent droughts, at the same time wishing for good rainfall for the rice harvest.



A fine example of intricately carved, and painted dragons adorning the bows of dragon boats. The dragon boat races, feature plenty of beer-drinking and alcohol consumption. Traditional Chinese cereal based wines are a popular alcoholic beverage during the festival.

Ancient Chinese adorned themselves with highly aromatic sachets containing various scented herbs. These very colorful and ornamental accessories were considered good luck. Another tradition was to wash in water that had Wormwood soaked in it, to repel mosquitoes, flies, and other insects during the summer dragon boat festival.

There were many other old customs associated with the festival, some of which are still observed today.

In 2009, UNESCO included the Dragon Boat Festival to the Intangible Cultural Heritage List, becoming the first Chinese festival to receive the honor.

Nowadays, many corporations have their own dragon boat teams this is because dragon boat racing is considered distinctive in its ability to bridge communication gaps by building strong, supportive relationships. They claim the racing promotes work dynamics, increases paddler motivation, improves communication, boosts self-confidence, and breaks down barriers among crew members. An excellent recipe for corporate team building. Becoming a crewmember of a dragon boat team is considered quite an achievement amongst the participating corporate community.

End

Note. This is a non-commercial document and strictly not for profit. Images are from various uncredited sources available on public domains and used under the Fair Use categories for review and educational purposes only.

References are from various "Dragon Boat" sources available on Public Domains and the internet.