

Thrilling Races and Rich Traditions: Dragon Boat Festival Celebrates Culture and Community *{reproduced with permission of author & Chinese Ancestry Research}*

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You know the annual Dragon Boat Festival (龙舟节) or Duanwu Jie (端午节) is near when restaurants and bakeries start promoting the sticky rice dumplings, or zongzi (粽子), as treats or gifts. While they can be eaten all year round, it is a highlight of the festival, which falls on the fifth day of the fifth month in the Chinese lunar calendar.

That's June 10 this year, but you can start making preparations for it now.

The festival is known by other names, including Duanyang Festival (端阳节), Chongwu Festival (重午节、重五节) and Tianzhong Festival (天中节). Some, such as the foodies in Singapore, even call it "Dumpling Festival" (肉粽节).

The traditional festival of the Han Chinese is a gathering to worship the gods and ancestors, pray for blessings, and ward off evil spirits. It also celebrates entertainment and food.

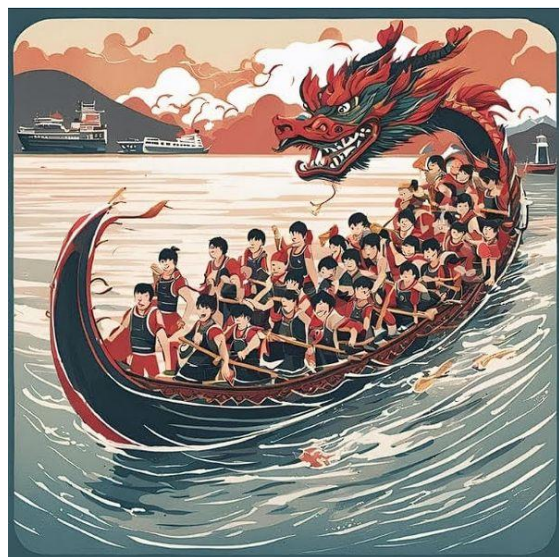
It was long marked as a cultural festival in China and is a public holiday in China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. It is also observed by the Chinese communities of Southeast Asia, including Singapore and Malaysia. Equivalent and related official festivals include the Korean Dano, Japanese Tango no sekku, and Vietnamese Tết Đoan Ngọ.

In September 2009, UNESCO recognised the festival as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, highlighting its global cultural significance. It is the first Chinese holiday to receive the honour, and is one of the four traditional festivals in China together with the Spring Festival (春节) or Chinese New Year, Qingming Festival (清明节) and Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋节).

Origins of the festival

The Dragon Boat Festival traces back to ancient Chinese culture, rooted in Fuxi's Taiji Eight Trigrams (伏羲太极八卦) and its calendrical systems, directions, solar terms, and other elements.

The festival's origins lie in the summer season's changes and climate, adjacent to the summer solstice, also known as the Summer Festival. The Huaxia (华夏) ethnic group, descendants of Fuxi's Green Dragon Clan, holds significance in this cultural narrative. Worship of Fuxi during the Dragon Boat Festival, observed predominantly in regions influenced by Taiji Eight Trigrams culture, particularly the south, perpetuates through dragon boat ceremonies.



In ancient times, Huaxia ancestors migrated southward from the Central Plains to regions below the Huai River, Han River, and Yangtze River. By the Spring and Autumn Period, dragon boat racing customs, venerating Fuxi, had solidified.

The festival's association with Qu Yuan 屈原, a patriotic poet, emerged later during the Han dynasty. Interpretations of the festival's origins vary, encompassing commemorations of Qu Yuan, welcoming the God of the Waves (Wu Zi Xu or 伍子胥), avoiding inauspicious days, celebrating the dragon as a totem, and associating with the summer solstice.

Qu Yuan 屈原 hailed from the State of Chu 楚国 during the Warring States period. He was ostracised due to his loyalty to Chu Huaiwang 楚怀王, and was eventually exiled. On the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, he drowned himself in the Miluó River 汨罗江.

When the local people heard the news, they rowed boats to rescue him, but to no avail. They then sailed their boats on the river to express their grief, which later evolved into dragon boat racing. Additionally, they threw rice dumplings into the river to prevent fish from consuming Qu Yuan's body, forming the custom of eating zongzi 粽子.

Both the tradition of eating zongzi and the dragon boat races during the Dragon Boat Festival originate from the commemoration of Qu Yuan.

The Tang dynasty poet Wenxiu's 文秀 poem "Duan Wu" (端午) attests to this:

节分端午自谁言，
万古传闻为屈原。
堪笑楚江空渺渺，
不能洗得直臣冤。

Who first spoke of the Dragon Boat Festival on the day of the summer solstice?

Throughout the ages, it has been known as Qu Yuan's day.

It's laughable how vast the Chu River is,

Yet it cannot wash away the injustice done to the loyal minister.

Celebrating community and culture

While the festival is celebrated with various customs that reflect its historical origins and cultural significance, the dragon boat race is still the most prominent activity. Teams of paddlers in ornately decorated dragon-shaped boats race to the beat of drums, symbolising the frantic search for Qu Yuan.

Dragon boat racing has grown into an international sport with competitions held worldwide. This expansion has helped to globalise the festival, introducing its rich traditions to diverse audiences, fostering cultural exchange and promoting global harmony.

The sport also fosters a sense of community and collective identity. The preparation and participation in dragon boat races require teamwork, coordination, and cooperation. These activities bring people together, strengthening social bonds and promoting a sense of unity. Such communal events are essential in building strong, cohesive societies.

Another enduring tradition is the preparation and consumption of the rice dumplings, which come in various shapes and fillings depending on regional preferences. They are served and eaten as a tribute to the rice offerings once made to appease the river spirits and protect Qu Yuan's body.

In some parts of the world, the festival is also marked by the hanging of mugwort and calamus, plants believed to ward off evil spirits and diseases. People also wear fragrant sachets and drink realgar wine, both of which are thought to protect against illness and poison. The focus on natural remedies and protection is particularly resonant today as it aligns with modern interests in holistic health practices.

In modern times, the festival has evolved, blending traditional practices with contemporary celebrations. While its historical and cultural roots remain important, the festival has become a time for promoting health, well-being and cultural heritage.

At its core, the festival celebrates values that are universally cherished, such as loyalty, patriotism, and the spirit of sacrifice. The story of Qu Yuan's dedication and the collective effort to honour his memory resonate with fundamental human principles.

As the Dragon Boat Festival continues to evolve, it remains a poignant reminder of the values of loyalty, community and resilience that transcend time and borders, and a long-held tradition that binds Chinese from all over the world.