

The Enduring Legacy of the Duan Wu Festival

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A Fragrant Festival Returns Each Summer

As the scent of bamboo leaves and sticky rice fills the air, cities across Asia prepare for one of the most anticipated events on the cultural calendar: the Duan Wu Festival 端午節.

The festival falls on the 5th day of the 5th lunar month, which is May 31 this year.

Best known for its delicious zongzi 粽子, it is affectionately dubbed the “Dumpling Festival 肉粽節” in Singapore.

It also goes by other names in China: Duanyang Festival 端陽節, Chongwu Festival 重午節/重五節, and Tianzhong Festival 天中節, and has inspired related traditions observed in Korea (Dano), Japan (Tango no sekku), and Vietnam (Tết Đoan Ngọ).

The Duan Wu Festival is one of only a handful of Chinese holidays recognised by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, joining the ranks of the Spring Festival, Qing Ming Festival, and Mid-Autumn Festival. This distinction highlights its importance not just to the Chinese, but to the world.

Ancient Roots and Evolving Legends

The origins of the Duan Wu Festival are as layered as the dumplings themselves.

Rooted in ancient Han Chinese customs, it was historically a time to honour gods and ancestors, seek blessings, and drive away evil spirits — beliefs shaped by the rhythms of the lunar calendar and the agricultural cycle.

One of the earliest connections is to Fúxī's Tàijí Eight Trigrams 伏羲太極八卦, reflecting a deep relationship between the festival and ancient cosmology. The Huáxià 華夏 people, ancestors of the Han Chinese, brought dragon boat rituals with them as they migrated south, embedding the dragon — a symbol of power and protection — at the heart of the festivities.

The most enduring tale, however, belongs to Qū Yuán 屈原 — a loyal minister and poet of the ancient State of Chǔ 楚國.

In an era of corruption and betrayal, he remained steadfast, offering counsel his ruler would not heed. When his homeland fell to invaders, Qū Yuán walked into the Miluó River 汨羅江, choosing death over dishonour.

The villagers who loved him raced their boats out in search, beating drums to scare away fish and throwing dumplings into the water to keep his spirit from hunger.

But Qū Yuán left behind more than legend. He left his words — and his sorrow — etched into Chinese literature like ripples on a river's surface.

Let us pause, then, and listen to a few lines from his most famous work, Lí Sāo 離騷 (“Encountering Sorrow”), where he reveals the soul of a man who stood tall in the storm:

Lí Sāo 離騷 (by Qū Yuán 屈原)

帝高陽之苗裔兮，朕皇考曰伯庸。
攝提貞於孟陬兮，惟庚寅吾以降。
皇覽揆余初度兮，肇錫余以嘉名：
名余曰正則兮，字余曰靈均。

From lofty Gaoyang's noble line I spring,
My royal sire was known as Bo Yong.
In spring's first month, beneath the stars' bright ring,
On Gengyin day, to life I did belong.
The emperor beheld my birth with grace,
And gifted me a name of virtue true:
"Zheng Ze" to guide me in life's race,
Styled "Ling Jun", a name of honor too.

These lines are more than poetry. They are identity. Memory. A cry across time.

That is the spirit we still remember today — not just with ceremonies or cuisine, but with a reverence for character and conviction.

From the rippling oars of dragon boats to the folded layers of zongzi 粽子, the Duan Wu Festival reminds us that even in the face of loss, loyalty lives on.



Modern Customs, Timeless Values

Today, the Duan Wu Festival is a vibrant blend of old and new.

Dragon boat racing has become a global sport, with international competitions from Hong Kong to Vancouver, drawing teams of all backgrounds.

The dumpling, once a humble offering to river spirits, now comes in a dazzling variety of flavours — from classic pork and salted egg to modern creations like chocolate or truffle.

Beyond the races and food, families hang mugwort and calamus to ward off bad luck, don fragrant sachets, and sip realgar wine — a nod to ancient health practices that resonate with today's interest in natural remedies.

In some communities, children compete in egg-balancing games at noon, believed to bring good fortune for the year.

A Festival for the World

As the Dragon Boat Festival continues to spread across continents, it serves as a bridge between generations and cultures.

It is a day to remember loyalty and sacrifice, to celebrate teamwork and unity, and to share in the simple joy of coming together — values that are as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago.

Whether you're racing a dragon boat, savouring a dumpling, or simply enjoying the festivities, the Duan Wu Festival is an invitation for everyone to be part of a tradition that honours the past while embracing the future.