



Dragon Scales Nine

History and Ceremonies

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Dragon boat culture and history

Dragon boating is not just about paddling on the water! The history of dragon boating goes back over 2500 years to China.

History or myth?

The Legend of Qu Yuan

The Tuen Ng (Dragon Boat Festival) traditionally commemorates a heroic gesture and a tragic event that took place in ancient China more than 2000 years ago. The Dragon Boat Festival of Qu Yuan falls on the Double Fifth - the fifth day of the fifth moon in the Chinese Lunar Calendar.

The government of the Kingdom of Chu was a corrupt one, and after jealous rivals falsely accused him of treason, a well loved statesman, warrior and poet, 'Qu Yuan' (pronounced Chu Ywan), was banished. In despair and, perhaps as a final act of protest against the government, he threw himself into the Mi Lo River and drowned.

The Chinese people have never forgotten this desperate heroic act and when anglers raced their boats to recover his body before fish, (beating drums and throwing rice dumplings into the river to distract them) could devour it they founded a tradition that continues to this day.

Each year, on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month (usually June) crews of paddlers re-enact that frantic rush to save Qu Yuan, by powering long narrow boats with the ferocious heads of dragons mounted on the prow through the water, to the frenzied, rhythmic beating of drums. It is not known how the dragon boat prow came into being, but it is thought that over the years, they were added to ward off evil water spirits.

This probably arose because the combination of the fifth lunar numbers is thought to be a bad omen and dragon boat races held, at this time, would ward off evil spirits; protect the health of the people and ensure a good crop each year.

Special foods are also eaten at this time of year, especially in Hong Kong, including replicas of the Rice Dumplings that the anglers threw into the Milo River, all those years ago in a desperate attempt to save Qu Yuan.

Ceremonies

The Eye Dotting Ceremony

Dragons in South East Asia are looked upon with great reverence and are to be worshipped. Chinese Emperors of old called themselves 'Dragons'. Dragon boats have good spirits, dedicated to providing enjoyment for the racers. Before the races commence a Taoist Priest will offer prayers to the spirits of the dragon boats.

The priest then makes offerings of fruit, jasmine tea, alcohol, and rice. These offerings appease the spirits of the water and calm them in preparation for the racing ahead. If that was not done, legend has it that the Water Gods would clash with the Dragon spirits of the boats, with potentially disastrous consequences.

Also offered at this time is symbolic money, bank notes from the Bank of Hell. The smoke from these notes goes to Heaven and appeases the Gods to ensure safety and good racing. He will also throw some notes on to the water for the Sea Gods. Having warded off evil spirits with his earlier prayers the priest can now bring the dragon boats to life and make them strong for the racing ahead.

Once the dragons have been successfully resuscitated, the priest offers thanks to heaven and the Gods, paving the way for future successful races. The boats are now ready to do battle!

Chinese Lion Dance

At dragon boat festivals, the Chinese Lion Dance provides entertainment, a cultural display and expels evil spirits.

The lion dance is also called the Game of the Lion.

Lions are not indigenous to China and have always been considered mythical beasts by the Chinese people.

Lions are highly valued and symbolically associated with purity and protection.