

# Ancient Roots

**The Dragon Boat Festival is celebrated around early June on the 5th day of the 5th lunar month. This explains its alternate name, the Double Fifth Festival.**

**This festival has been observed for over 2000 years and, like many Chinese festivals, combines folkloric elements with stories commemorating figures from the past.**

**Many scholars believe the origins of the festival lie in the ancient rituals of dragon worship, in which special food was offered and dragon boat races were performed to ask the Dragon God for a good harvest.**

**The 5th month is known as an unlucky month. Ancient people believed that at this time diseases began to spread and poisonous insects appeared. Many of the customs associated with the Dragon Boat Festival are to do with strengthening the body to ward off sickness and avoiding bad luck.**



**Over time, these beliefs and traditions merged with stories of figures who were linked to the double fifth date. The most well known story of this festival is that of poet Qu Yuan (c.340–278 BC). His story has become the most popular way to explain the origins**

**and customs of this popular festival, including why dragon boats are raced and why sticky rice dumplings ('zongzi') are eaten. Other areas of China commemorate the stories of Wu Zixu or Cao'e, who, like Qu Yuan, embodied characteristics of bravery and patriotism.**



# Food and Drink

**Foods eaten during the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival are chosen for their symbolism, links to the story of Qu Yuan or nutritional value. As with many Chinese festivals, culinary traditions vary widely across regions.**

## Zongzi (粽子)

These pyramid-shaped, bamboo-wrapped parcels contain sticky rice mixed with a variety of fillings. In some areas, people enjoy savoury fillings such as diced meat or egg yolks and in others, sweet fillings such as bean paste are more popular. The origin of these dumplings refer back to the story of patriotic Qu Yuan, who committed suicide by drowning. Local people threw 'zongzi' into the river to distract the fish so they would leave his body alone.



## Wine

People drank realgar wine - wine fermented with grain and powdered realgar - which was believed to keep mosquitoes and other poisonous insects away. It is not as popular these days due to concerns about its toxicity, but other wines such as plum might be enjoyed instead.



## Eggs

Eggs steamed with garlic are eaten at breakfast in some regions, providing a nutritional boost. In other areas, eggs are boiled in tea and their shells dyed red and hung in bags around children's necks. This was believed to bring good luck. Other people enjoy duck eggs to help protect the body from sickness.

## Eel

In some regions, eels are in season at this time of the year and are eaten for their health benefits.

## Mianshanzi (面扇子)

This brightly coloured food is made from wheat flour and arranged in a fan shape to resemble fans that were once made and sold during this festival. It is most often eaten in Gansu province.

## Jiandui (煎堆)

These are sticky rice balls, fried and coated in sesame seeds and although they are eaten all year round, in Fujian province they are particularly popular during the Dragon Boat Festival. In the past, people said that the rainy season that preceded the Dragon Boat Festival was caused by holes in the sky. Eating 'jiandui' filled the holes and stopped the rain.



# Traditions

**Dragon Boat Festival customs date back to ancient times. Some are linked to folk beliefs and others to the story of Qu Yuan.**

## Dragon Boat racing

Dragon Boat racing, which reminds us of the efforts of villagers trying to save Qu Yuan from drowning, is a popular way to celebrate this festival, especially in Hong Kong and southern China.



Dragon boats are long, highly decorated with dragon heads and other motifs and are paddled by 20-30 people or more, plus a drummer and steersperson. These traditional races have become a worldwide sport, with Dragon Boat teams and festivals in many major cities around the world.

## Protection from evil

The fifth lunar month is seen as an unlucky month. Many traditions are linked to ancient practices that protect against bad luck, ill health and the 5 poisonous insects: snakes, scorpions, centipedes, toads and spiders.

Some families hang mugwort leaves on their door frame to repel insects and promote good health. Others wear silk pouches filled with aromatic herbs that bring good luck and keep evil spirits at bay. A tradition in some families is tying a 5-colour string bracelet



around children's wrists, not to be taken off until the first rain after the Dragon Boat Festival. The belief was the bracelet would protect the children from harm or disease and promote a long and healthy life.

## Zhong Kui (鍾馗)

Hanging a picture of the vanquisher of ghosts and demons, Zhong Kui, is another way to protect the family from evil at this time of year.



## Other customs

Regional activities vary widely, but games play a large part: balancing eggs at midday, for example. In Qu Yuan's hometown in Hubei province, people organize poetry parties and commemorate the poet's death at his memorial stone.





# Origin Stories

Stories linked to the Dragon Boat Festival date from ancient times. The most popular story is that of Qu Yuan, but in some regions of China, Wu Zixu or Cao'e are honoured.



## Qu Yuan (屈原, c. 340–278 BC)

About 2,000 years ago in the kingdom of Chu, there was a scholar-official and poet by the name of Qu Yuan. He loved his country and wrote beautiful poems about it.

Qu Yuan was a trusted advisor to the king of Chu. But other scholar-officials jealously spread false rumours about his loyalty, and the King, believing these rumours, sent Qu Yuan into exile.

During his exile, Qu Yuan wrote many poems, including one of his most famous, The Lament. It expressed the pain Qu Yuan felt at leaving his homeland.

When Qu Yuan heard that the Kingdom of Chu had been captured by the opposing forces of the state of Qin, he fell into despair. He walked into the Miluo River, holding a rock, never to return. Local people, realising what had happened, took to their boats to try to save Qu Yuan. When they could not find him, they threw sticky rice dumplings into the water to distract the fish, and beat drums to ward off evil spirits.

It is from this story that the Dragon Boat Festival customs of eating sticky rice dumplings and racing dragon boats are said to originate.

## Wu Zixu (伍子胥, d. 484 BC) and Cao'e (曹娥, 130–144 AD)



Wu Zixu was a trusted advisor in the Kingdom of Wu. When a new king took power, he believed a corrupt statesman who falsely accused Wu Zixu of treachery. Wu Zixu was forced to commit suicide and his body was thrown into the river on the 5th day of the 5th month. He is remembered for his loyalty.

Cao'e was a young girl whose father went missing, presumed drowned. After 3 days she went into the river to look for him. Her body was found, clutching that of her father, on the 5th day of the 5th month. She is remembered for her filial piety and sacrifice. A river in Zhejiang Province is named after her.



Cao'e River View from Laobadi Dam  
Source: Wikipedia





# Dragons 龍

The Dragon Boat Festival likely grew out of ancient dragon worship rituals. Dragons are deeply rooted in Chinese culture and their images and symbolism appear in everything from folklore beliefs to idiomatic sayings.



## Symbolism

Dragons are powerful, dignified creatures associated with wisdom and benevolence, beauty, strength and good luck. People born in the zodiac year of the dragon are said to be strong willed, confident and brave. Ancient people believed that people born in a dragon year were destined to be leaders.

Dragons have long been seen as the rulers of the weather and bodies of water such as lakes, rivers and oceans. Many ancient agricultural rituals would involve making offerings to the dragon: for example, to bring rain in times of drought, or stop the rain in times of flood.

The dragon also stands for imperial power and majesty, and depictions of 5-clawed dragons symbolised the Emperor. Imperial silk robes with embroidered images of dragons and were yellow, red or black, depending on the dynasty. Common people were not allowed to embroider images of dragons on their clothing.

## Appearance

Chinese dragons are most commonly depicted with a long, snake-like body with the physical attributes of 9 different animals including the scales of a fish and claws of an eagle. Most do not have wings, though they can fly. The colour of the dragon is significant too: for example, red dragons bring good luck and black dragons symbolize vengeance.

## Sayings

畫龍點睛 - "Paint the dragon, dot the eyes" = add the finishing touch  
人中之龍 - "A dragon among men" = an exceptional talent



# Dragon Boat Racing

Watching or participating in Dragon Boat racing is an important part of this festival. Dragon Boat racing has roots in ancient agricultural rituals honouring Dragon deities and nowadays it is an internationally recognized competitive sport.

## Boats and crew

Sizes vary but most dragon boats consist of a crew of 22 people: 20 paddlers sitting in pairs facing the direction of travel; a drummer whose beat or calls help paddlers synchronize their strokes; and a steersperson who controls the direction of the boat.



Photo: Vancouver Sun

Traditionally the boats were made of teak but now lighter, modern materials like fibreglass are used. The boats are long and narrow with a dragon's head at the front and tail at the back, although these decorative pieces not used during training. Races are a sprint to the finish and are several hundred meters long.

## Awakening the Dragon

Before the races start, a Taoist priest gives a blessing over the dragon boats. By burning joss sticks (a type of incense), invoking deities and making offerings, the priest ensures that the racecourse, boats and competitors are blessed and given the strength of the dragon. Then the eyes of the dragons on the boats are dotted with paint - an ancient Chinese ritual that causes the dragon, sleeping in the mountains, to wake up and become re-energized.



Photo: Vancouver Sun

## Vancouver connection - The Canadian International Dragon Boat Festival Society

Dragon boat racing in North America started during Expo 86 in Vancouver, when the government of Hong Kong gifted six teak dragon boats to the city to run races in the spirit of sport, harmony, cultural understanding, and friendship. From its roots in False Creek, the sport grew rapidly across Canada and has now become the world's fastest growing sport with 50 million paddlers today on every continent.

