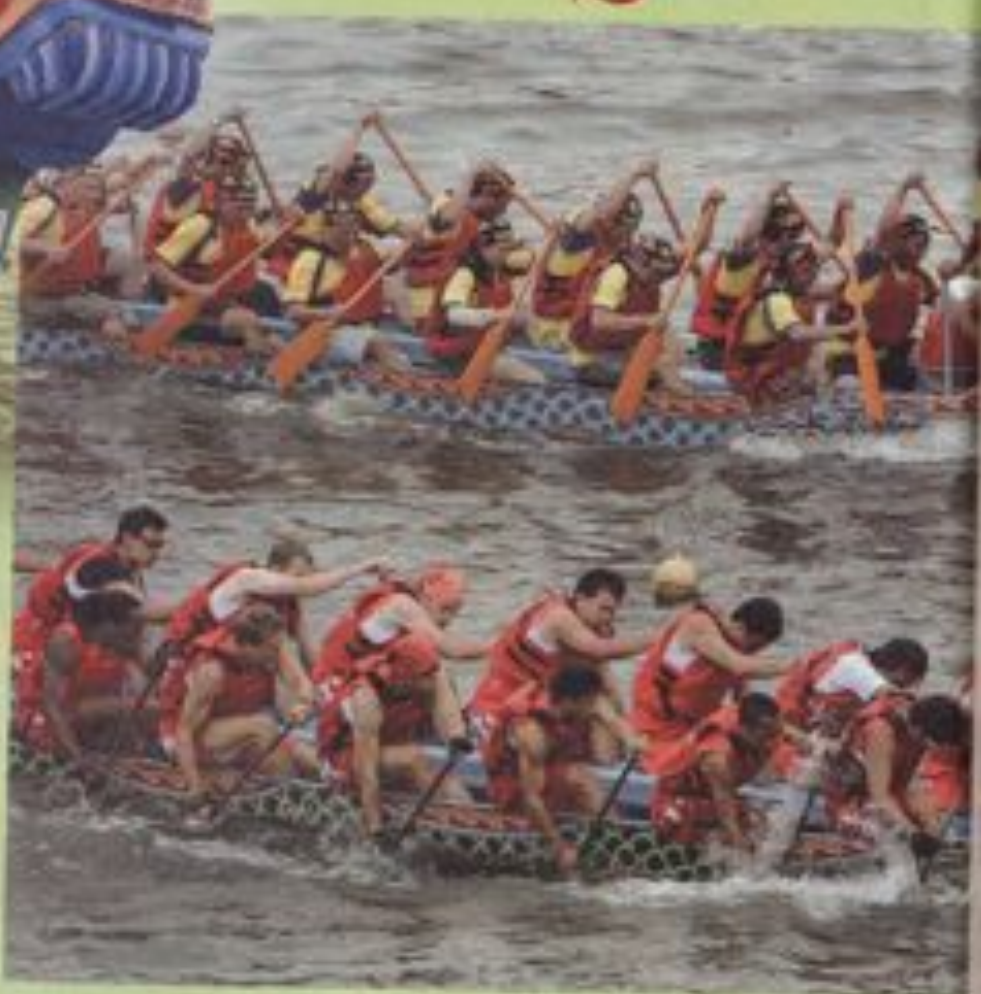
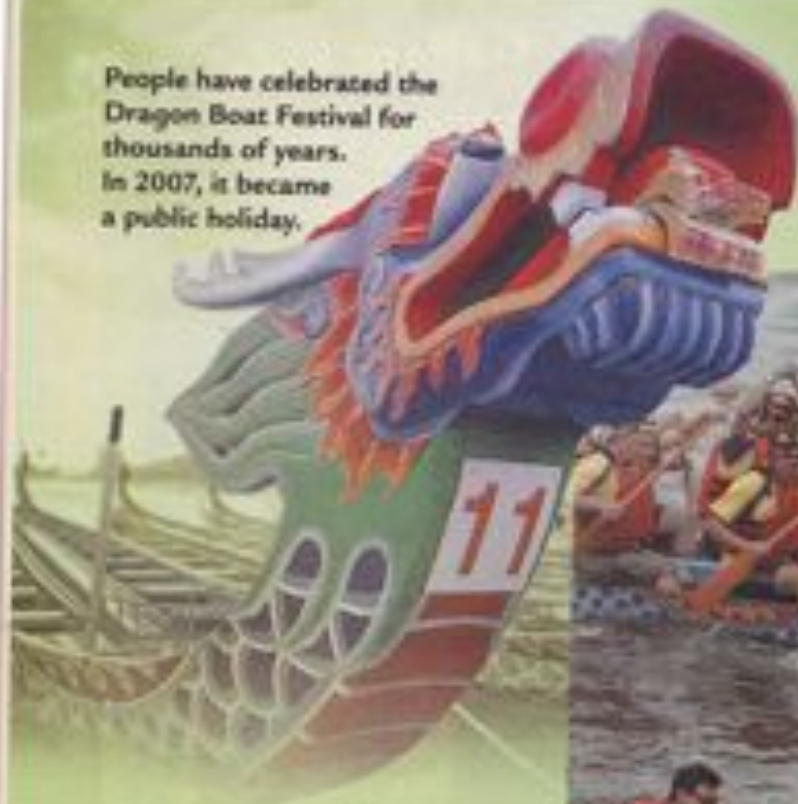


People have celebrated the Dragon Boat Festival for thousands of years. In 2007, it became a public holiday.

Dragons



By Natasha Yin

Growing up in Hong Kong, I can still remember how I felt when I heard the thundering drumbeats. *Boom-be-boom! Boom-be-boom!* How my heart pounded with those drums. I cheered on my favorite boat as the rowers dipped and sliced their oars in rhythm with the beats. The coxswain bent and pulled in perfect timing.

The boats glided on the surface of the water so smoothly, they looked as if they were being pulled across a sheet of ice. One boat would surge ahead, then another, as the crews wrestled for the lead. Electrifying chills would shimmy up and down my spine as the rowers propelled their boats across the finish line. The first team to grab the flag at the end of the course won the race.

The Races Begin

Not only is dragon-boat racing a challenging sport, but the boats themselves are wonderful to look

at. The long, sleek wooden boats—40 to 100 feet long—have bows shaped like dragon heads; scaly bodies painted red, green, yellow, blue, and gold; and dragon tails at the stern.

Often, before the start of each race, priests in golden robes perform a noisy ceremony called Waking the Dragon. They chant prayers, light incense and firecrackers, clang gongs, beat

drums, and paint the “dragon” pupils red or black. Without the dots, the dragon looks asleep.

The typical boat has 20 to 26 rowers who sit side by side in two rows. Some boats are so long that 80 rowers can fit inside. A drummer at the front of the boat pounds on a huge drum with sticks. A helmsman sits at the back controlling the boat, keeping it on track.

Dragon-boat racing is always the best part of the Dragon Boat Festival.

Race on Water



Honoring the Dragon

The Dragon Boat Festival is the oldest Chinese festival. It was first celebrated more than 2,000 years ago. The festival takes place on the fifth day of the fifth moon on the Chinese lunar calendar usually between late May and late June. In China, this is a time when the heat brings lots of insects. In the past, it also brought diseases. So the festival began as a celebration for driving away sickness and evil spirits. People hung pictures of Chung Kwei, the guardian against evil spirits, on their doors. They wore

charms around their necks for luck, and children carried sweet-smelling silk pouches containing special herbs.

Rituals, such as the dragon-boat races, were also performed to honor the "dragon" and to ask it to bring about plentiful crops. In Chinese legend, dragons are not fierce and fire-breathing, but kind. They are also symbols of water, ruling the rivers and seas and controlling the clouds and rains.

The Legend of Chu Yuan

Later, another legend became associated with the festival. Chu Yuan was a poet and loyal, faithful adviser to the emperor of the Kingdom of Chu. One day, Chu Yuan warned the emperor not to meet with the emperor of a neighboring kingdom. He feared it might be a trap.

Unfortunately, the emperor did not listen to his adviser and was captured and killed. Chu Yuan was heartbroken and threw himself into the Mi Lo River. The people of the kingdom rushed to the river to try to save him. They banged on their drums and splashed their oars in the water to scare away the fish. They threw in rice so that the fish and water dragons would leave him alone.

To this day, people remember Chu Yuan during the Dragon Boat Festival by eating *zhong*, a pyramid-shaped sticky rice dumpling. It is usually filled with meat and salted duck's egg, then wrapped in lotus or banana leaves

and steamed. The search for Chu Yuan is reenacted by beating drums and racing dragon boats.

Dragon Boats Race Everywhere!

Today you can see dragon-boat races in many countries. The San Francisco International Dragon Boat Festival is one of the largest in the United States and attracts more than 180 teams.

Racing dragon boats is one of the fastest-growing water sports. At the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, dragon boats also rowed into history when they were used, for the first time ever, to carry the Olympic torch—a great honor indeed! 🏆

Zhong

The traditional food of the festival has different fillings, depending on the region where it is made. In northern China, dumplings are filled with dates. In eastern China's Jiaxing County, they are stuffed with pork. In the southern province of Guangdong, *zhong* is usually made with pork, ham, water chestnuts, and other ingredients. And in Sichuan Province, they are served with a sugar dressing.

But no matter what the filling, these dumplings are so popular they are eaten any time of year.

