



THE 1ST RIVER NILE DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL

As the very first Dragon Boat Festival prepares to come to Cairo in October, explore the history, the culture, and the opportunity of this spectacular tradition.

October 1st, 2016

THE HISTORY AND THE MYTHS

Dragon boating is a Chinese tradition of nearly 2,000 years. It is believed to have its origins in the time of the Zhou Dynasty, when China was divided into seven warring kingdoms. This was a time of great violence and unrest, with devastating battles in which many lives were lost.

The kingdom of Qin was ruled by an ambitious king called Qin Shi Huang who was determined to become ruler of all seven kingdoms.

Qu Yuan lived in the kingdom of Chu in the south of China, trusted counselor to the King of Chu. He was a military officer and a poet. A wise and peaceful man, he loved his kingdom and wanted it to remain independent. However, many officers were very jealous of Qu Yuan, and tried to convince the King of Chu that Qu Yuan was not trustworthy. The king believed these lies and banished Qu Yuan into exile.

Qu Yuan wrote many beautiful poems about Chu, including one called 'Li Sao' – The Lament:

Had I not loved my prime and spurned the vile,

Why should I not have changed my former style?

My chariot drawn by steeds of race divine, I urged; to guide the king my sole design.

His poems show his deep love for his country and contempt for the ungracious ruling class. So passionate was he that, over the years, Qu Yuan has transcended the simple story of his self-sacrifice, and come to represent the very embodiment of patriotism.

When Qu Yuan discovered that Qin Shi Huang had invaded his beloved kingdom of Chu, he was so saddened by the news that he killed himself by jumping into the Miluo River. The people had a great respect for Qu Yuan, and when they heard what happened, they rushed to the riverbank and took to their boats. They banged drums and hit the water. Some threw parcels of rice into the water so that the fish would eat the rice and leave the body of the poet in peace.

These histories and stories blended over time into the encompassing myth of Qu Yuan, and the tradition of the Dragon Boat Festival began.

THE TRADITION

Over time, both the rowing of boats and eating zongzi (sticky rice balls that point back to that original incident on the river) became much bigger than just a simple tradition and it developed into the Dragon Boat Festival. It falls on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. Because of this, it's also known as

Double Fifth. In China, the festival is called Duanwu, literally: the 'Solar Maximus festival'. In the Chinese lunar calendar, Duanwu is the time when the sun is at its maximum strength. In China, the sun is considered male, as is the dragon, so the festival is held when the sun is at its peak.

In 2005, the Chinese government started a reform of its holiday system, adding three traditional holidays to the list. Duanwu was celebrated as a public holiday for the first time in 2008, along with Qingming or Tomb Sweeping day and the Mid-Autumn festival or Moon festival.

Dragon boat racing and eating zongzi are the most popular traditions at the Dragon Boat Festival. And thanks to the great Chinese diaspora, zongzi has become just as ubiquitous around the world as the dragon boats. Today you can get sticky rice balls wrapped in a pandan leaf anywhere there's a Chinese population.

THE DRAGONS

Dragons are deeply rooted in Chinese culture, so the Chinese often consider themselves as 'the descendants of the dragon'. According to popular belief, if you are born in the year of dragon, you will be an intelligent and brave leader. A classic dragon has an ox head, a deer's antlers, a horse's mane, a snake's body, an eagle's claws, and a fish tail. The dragon rides the clouds in the sky and commands the wind, mist and rain.

THE BOATS

A dragon boat is a human-powered watercraft. They were traditionally made in the Pearl River Delta region of China's southern Guangdong Province out of teak wood (mostly imported from Pontianak, Indonesia) to various designs and sizes. In other parts of China, different kinds of wood are used to build them. Currently, boats are made for competitions out of carbon fiber and other lightweight materials.

Dragon boats are generally rigged with an ornately carved Chinese dragon head at the bow and a tail at the stern. At other times (such as during training), decorative regalia is usually removed, although the drum often remains aboard for drummers to practice. The hull is painted with the



dragon's scales. The paddles symbolically represent the claws. The long, narrow boat can have as few as 10 paddlers, though traditional dragon boats have as many as 50 paddlers and more.

THE RACING

Despite its ancient folk origins, dragon boat racing has emerged in modern times as an international sport, beginning in Hong Kong in 1976 when the tourism bureau organised the first international races. But the history of dragon boats in competition reaches as far back as the same era as the original games of Olympia in ancient Greece. Dragon boat racing was listed into the Chinese state sports competition programs for the first time in 1980.

Dragon boat racing is the fastest growing team sport in the world. Since the formation of the International Dragon Boat Federation (IDBF); the sport has spread rapidly throughout the world. Today, 30 years after the first Hong Kong races, the numbers show the truly impressive development of modern dragon boat sport. With nearly 50 million participants in China; over 300,000 in the UK and Europe, including Czech

Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Russia; 90,000 in Canada and the USA and many thousands in Australia and New Zealand and with the sport now spreading through the Caribbean, Africa, and the Pacific Basin; dragon boat racing, under its governing bodies, is a vibrant, effective, and independent paddle sport.

The races are a colorful spectacle, with at least two boats competing against each other over distances from 200 to 2000 meters and above. Not only are strength, endurance, and skill important but also teamwork and harmony of purpose. Dragon boat racing has become a major part of Chinese culture, representing patriotism and group integrity.

THE OPPORTUNITY...HERE AND NOW

Many festival races are successful due to the number of crews that enter just for the fun and excitement of the event. One of the advantages of dragon boating is that you can form a festival crew and with little experience and knowledge, quickly become competitive in a dragon boat. A lot of festival crews come from the 'corporate market' and compete because it is a social event and a team building activity in which the strengths and abilities of employees are soon apparent.



Dragon boating is the mass participation paddle sport of today, with an ancient past and a very bright future. Not yet an Olympic sport but heading that way fast, dragon boat racing is a 'team sport'; a very social sport and great fun too! Attractive to the corporate market and as a 'community activity' it is also a high performance sport for elite standard athletes. This ability range in a team sport full of tradition, culture and social interaction is highly desirable in today's world. Dragon boating is a sport and recreational activity that can be pursued by everyone and anyone of all abilities and at every level of competition. That is the greatness of dragon boating!

We would like to invite those living in Egypt to attend the first Egyptian dragon boat event. You will have the opportunity to form a team of 12 paddlers and compete with other teams from all over the world on October 1st, 2016.

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