

## History of the Festival

### History of the Dragon Boat Festival

The Dragon Boat Festival commemorates the life and death of Chu Yuan (340 &ndash;278 BC), a political leader of the state of Chu.

Chu Yuan was a respected poet as well as politician of ancient China. When he lost the trust of the King and saw his home state of Chu fall into the hands of inept officials, he saw his country weakened with the ensuing invasion by its powerful neighbor. This saddened him so much that he drowned himself in the Mi-Lo River in despair.

The people of Chu rushed to rescue him, but rushed in vain. In memory of Chu Yuan's loyalty to the kingdom, and as a symbol to keep the fish away from his body, the people threw rice dumplings wrapped with bamboo leaves, called tzung-tze, into the river.

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 5th 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, including replicas of the Rice Dumplings (tzung-tze) that the fishermen threw into the Milo River, all those years ago in a desperate attempt to save Chu Yuan.

### Dragon Boating As A Sport

The sport of dragon boat racing has its roots in Ancient China, where the first dragon boat races were held more than 2500 years ago along the banks of the Yangtze River, in the same era in which the Greeks were holding their athletic competitions in Olympia. Dragon Boat racing was not introduced to the world at large until the 1970s when the Hong Kong Tourist Board staged an international Dragon Boat Festival to promote Hong Kong culture.

Since then, Dragon boat racing has spread like wildfire around the globe, with more than 50 million people now participating in competitions held on every continent. It is often heralded as the fastest growing water sport in the US, and one of the fastest-growing corporate team-building activities in the country.

Why is dragon boating becoming so popular? The success of the sport has much to do with its low cost, the ease of getting started in the sport, and the uncanny ability of the sport to bond together groups who train together.

### DC Dragon Boat Festival

Maybe not real, fire-breathing dragons, but there will be dragon boats on the Potomac.. This is one of the most colorful events anyone could hope to see.

Four boats painted to resemble scales in hues of green, red, blue and yellow sporting dragon heads and tails of blue, red and gold will line up to sprint over distances of 250 and 500 meters. The racing will be divided into festival and premier categories, open (men's), women's, mixed and youth divisions.

Premier teams are teams of elite athletes who travel from as far away as Taiwan to participate in our festival. They often train year-round, attend training camps, and participate in a worldwide circuit of international competitions. The premier teams include our own DC Dragons, the dragon boat arm of the National Capital Area Women's Paddling Association (NCAWPA). These teams have been competing in dragon boat events for many years throughout the United States, Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Germany, Great Britain. Out-of-state teams include teams from Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, New Jersey and New York. Even International teams attend from Canada and Taiwan.

Approximately two-thirds of the teams at the DC Dragon Boat Festival fall into the "festival" or "fun" category&mdash;teams who primarily participate in just one festival a year, and represent a wide range of schools, youth organizations, local businesses, and churches. They are relatively new to the sport; for many, this is their first year paddling. It is this "festival" category that has seen the greatest growth in recent years. The teams are from Chinese language schools, corporations, community groups, law firms, groups sponsored by restaurants, just to name a few.

Leading up to this event, NCAWPA and the DC Dragon Boat Club will provide all the training for novice crews. Each

festival team gets three practices prior to the race, each practice session lasts for one hour. Needless to say, this is just a start to becoming a dragonboat team, but they have learned enough to get that dragon from the start line to the finish line and have a great time doing it.

Come out and enjoy the races as well as the booths and exhibitions set up on the shore that highlight Chinese culture.