



## **Dragon Boat History**

The Chinese Dragon Boat Race Festival is a symbol of Chinese culture and spirit. As one of the three largest Chinese festivals of the year, this ancient and time-honored celebration can now be witnessed worldwide. To be a part of a Dragon Boat Race as a participant or spectator is a thrilling experience.

Dragon Boat racing is a reflection of a memorable historical event that occurred more than 2,400 years ago. It is a story of self-sacrifice. Numerous supremacy wars were erupting during the “Warring States” of the fourth century B. C. Emperor Chu’s kingdom was one of the mightiest remaining.

A man of great respect, Qu Yuan was a poet, minister and councilor to Emperor Chu. Unfortunately, he was cast into exile because of his politically sensitive poems. Distraught and inconsolable, Qu Yuan drowned himself in the Mi Lo River in an act of desperation and sorrow.

Local fishermen raced to the tragic scene in their long, swift boats. To prevent his body from being despoiled by the fish, they splashed their oars and beat their drums to disperse them. They threw rice dumplings wrapped in leaves into the river in attempts to distract the fish from Qu Yuan. The Dragon Boat Festival, typically held on the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar, re-enacts both the human tragedy and the sense of community that it evoked.

Many of the original rituals are still practiced today at festivals all over the world. As part of the opening ceremonies, a common practice is to “Awaken the Dragon” by dotting the eyes of the Dragon’s heads of each of the boats. Historically, the Dragon was the favored symbol of the Emperor, and the best Chinese artists were commissioned. Shortly after one such artist put the finishing touches on his work by etching the eyes on his exquisite stone Dragon, thunder and turbulent weather swept the land. It was believed the mythical beast was “awakened” and had “come to life”. Also, the significance of the eye dotting was to impress the boats and their crews with the strength of the Dragon and the blessing of the Goddess of the Sea.

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