

Dragon boat

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A **dragon boat** ([Chinese](#): 龍舟, 龍船; [Simplified Chinese](#): 龙舟, 龙船, [Mandarin Pinyin](#): lóng zhōu, lóng chuán) is a very long and narrow [human powered boat](#) used in the team [paddling sport](#) of **dragon boat racing**, which may also be known as **dragonboating**.

For [racing](#) events, dragon boats are always rigged with decorative [Chinese dragon](#) heads and tails and are required to carry a large drum aboard. At other times the decorative regalia is usually removed, although the drum often remains aboard for training purposes.

Dragon boat races are traditionally held to commemorate the death of [Qu Yuan](#), making dragonboating the only sport to be celebrated as a national holiday. The [Chinese lunar calendar](#) date is 5/5 which usually corresponds to a date in June.

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The crew of the dragon boat

The standard [crew](#) complement of a contemporary dragon boat is around 22, comprising 20 paddlers in pairs facing toward the bow of the boat, 1 drummer or caller at the bow facing toward the paddlers, and 1 steerer or tiller at the rear of the boat. Dragon boats vary in length and crew size will vary accordingly, from small dragon boats with 10 paddlers, up to the massive traditional boats which have upwards of 50 paddlers, plus drummer and steerer.

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The drummer and drumming

The **drummer** or **caller** or "cox" may be considered the "heartbeat" of the dragon boat, and leads the crew throughout a race with the rhythmic beating of a drum to indicate the timing and frequency of paddling strokes (i.e. the cadence, picking up the pace, slowing the rate, etc.) The caller may issue commands to the crew through a combination of hand signals and voice calls, and also generally exhorts the crew to perform at their peak. A caller/drummer is mandatory during racing events, but if he or she is not present during training, it is typical for the steerer to direct the crew.

Good callers should be able to synchronize the drumming cadence with the strokes of the leading pair of paddlers, rather than the other way around. As a tail wind, head wind or cross wind, may affect the amount of power needed to move the boat at hull speed throughout a race, a caller should also be aware of the relative position of the dragon boat to other boats, and to the finish line, in order to correctly issue commands to the crew as to when to best surge ahead, when to hold steady and when to peak for the finish. An expert level caller will be able to gauge the power of the boat and the paddlers through the sensation of acceleration, deceleration, and inefficiencies which are transmitted through the hull (ie. they will physically feel the boat action through their feet and gluteus maximus muscles).

Traditional dragonboats with 40 to 50 paddlers are so long that the drum is positioned amidships (in the middle of the boat) so that all paddlers can hear it amidst the noise of heated competition. However, for the smaller dragon boats of 20 paddlers which are most often used in competitive sporting events, the drum is located just aft of the dragon headed prow.

Some crews may also feature a **gong striker** who strikes a ceremonial gong mounted aboard the dragon boat. A gong striker may sometimes used as an alternative to a drummer.

The paddlers

The **paddlers** sit facing forwards, and use a specific type of paddle. The leading pair of paddlers, or "strokes" or "stokers", set the pace for the team. All other paddlers synchronize their strokes to the stroke paddlers only, for if they synchronize to the paddler sitting just ahead, the result of the split second difference of delay can result in a catapillar or centipede effect whereby each successive pair of blades hits the water a fraction of a second behind the blades in front, with the collective stroke of the boat falling out of synchronisation. During a race the sounds of other drums may also make it confusing or unreliable to time off the drum beat.

Very experienced paddlers will feel the response of the boat and its surge or resistance through the water via the blades of their paddles, and will adjust their reach, and the catch of their blade tips, in accordance with the power required to match the acceleration of the hull through the water at any given moment.

The steerer

The **steerer**, also known as the coxswain, helm, steersman, sweep, or tiller, controls the dragon boat with a steering oar similar in function to a tiller which is mounted at the rear of the boat. The steerer may work with the drummer to call out commands during a race.

Taiwanese flag catchers



 A Taiwanese style Flag Catching dragon boat during Dragon Boat Festival

Another dragon boat crew position which was first popularized on the island of Taiwan and which remains very popular there is the **flag puller** or **flag catcher**, who is tasked with grabbing a lane flag as the boat crosses the finish line. The first boat to pull their flag wins the race, while any boats which miss their flag are disqualified. The flag catcher normally sits behind the drummer, but as the boat approaches the finish line the flag catcher moves into position onto the top of the dragon head (see photo).

In historical times before the introduction of photo finishes and digital timing, or simply where such facilities are not available, flag catching is useful for distinguishing very close finishes (presumably an odd number of judges can decide the winner where multiple flags are caught very close together). A [Song Dynasty](#) landscape painting on silk records a dragon boat festival race on an imperial lake featuring flag pulling dragon boat races.

Dragon boats versus canoes and rowboats

Although a dragon boat is not a type of [canoe](#), they are both paddle-craft rather than rowing-craft, and crew members [paddle](#) rather than "row". Dragon boat paddlers sit, crouch or stand facing forward in the direction of travel, ie. facing the prow (front) of the boat, similar to crews in other paddling craft, whereas rowers sit facing backwards. Furthermore, the oars and sweeps manned by rowers are connected to their shells, whereas dragon boat paddles are freely held (other than the large sweep oar of the dragon boat, which is connected to the hull at the stern and is usually used only to steer rather than to propel the boat). People who paddle dragon boats may also be involved with [outrigger canoe racing](#) (or the sporting clubs of which they are members may provide both disciplines), due to some similarities in training regimes and sporting ethos.

Canoes are derived from hollowed out tree trunks (either single log, or single log supported by one or a pair of outriggered float pontoons); or from birch and other deciduous tree bark shells stretched over wooden frames. Dragon boats, however, derive from rafts of three lashed-together logs which have been hollowed out and are like bamboo rafts consisting of lashed, hollow bamboo stalks which can still be seen in China today. It is the three large, lashed, rafted logs of old that give the Hongkong style of dragon boats its characteristic hull form cross section underwater seen today, which is like a "W". The keel (plank) is higher than the two outboard chines formed by the rail planks, so a kind of tunnel effect running down the centreline (keel) of the boat is present due to this construction and design

History and culture of dragon boat racing

The use of dragon boats for racing and dragons are believed by modern scholars, sinologists and anthropologists to have originated in southern central [China](#) more than 2,500 years ago, along the banks of such iconic rivers as the **Chang Jiang** a.k.a. [Yangtze](#) (i.e. during the same era when the games of [ancient Greece](#) were being established at [Olympia](#)). Dragon boat racing as the basis for annual water rituals and festival celebrations, and for the traditional veneration of the Asian dragon water deity, has been practiced continuously since this period

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The Heavenly or Celestial Dragon

The dragon plays the most venerated role within the Chinese mythological tradition. For example, of the 12 animals of the [Chinese Zodiac](#) the only mythical creature is the dragon. The rest are not mythical (eg. dog, rat, tiger, horse, snake, rabbit, rooster, monkey, sheep, ox, pig - all of which are familiar to agrarian peasants.) Dragons are traditionally believed to be the [rulers](#) of rivers and seas and dominate the clouds and the rains of heaven. There are earth dragons, mountain dragons and sky or celestial dragons (Tian Long) in Chinese tradition.

[Sacrifices](#), sometimes [human](#), were involved in the earliest boat racing [rituals](#) it is believed. During these ancient times violent clashes between the [crew](#) members of the competing boats involved throwing stones and striking each other with bamboo stalks. Originally, paddlers or even an entire team falling into the water could receive no assistance from the onlookers as their misfortune was considered to be the will of the Dragon [Deity](#) which could not be interfered with. Those boaters who drowned were thought to have been sacrificed. That Qu Yuan sacrificed himself in protest through drowning speaks to this early notion.

Dragon boat racing traditionally coincides with the *5th day of the 5th [Chinese lunar month](#)* (varying from late May to June on the modern Gregorian Calendar). The Summer Solstice occurs around June 21 and is the reason why Chinese refer to their festival as "Duan Wu". Both the sun and the dragon are considered to be male. (The moon and the mythical phoenix are considered to be female.) The sun and the dragon are at their most potent during this time of the year, so cause for observing this through ritual celebrations such as dragon boat racing. It is also the time of farming year when rice seedlings must be transplanted in their paddy fields, for wet rice cultivation to take place.

This season is also associated with pestilence and disease, so is considered as a period of evil due to the high summer temperatures which can lead to rot and putrefaction in primitive societies lacking modern refrigeration and sanitation facilities. One custom involves cutting shapes of the *five [poisonous or venomous animals](#)* out of red paper, so as to ward off these evils. The paper snakes, centipedes, scorpions, lizards and toads - those that supposedly lured "evil spirits" - were sometimes placed in the mouths of the carved wooden dragons.

Venerating the Dragon deity was meant to avert misfortune and calamity and encourage [rainfall](#) which is needed for the fertility of the crops and thus for the prosperity of an agrarian way of life. Celestial dragons were the controllers of the rain, the Monsoon winds and the clouds. The Emperor was "The Dragon" or the "Son of Heaven", and Chinese people refer to themselves as "dragons" because of its spirit of strength and vitality. Unlike the dragons in European mythology which are considered to be evil and demonic, Asian dragons are regarded as wholesome and beneficent, and thus worthy of veneration, not slaying.

Another ritual called [Awakening of the Dragon](#) involves a [Daoist priest](#) dotting the bulging eyes of the carved dragon head attached to the boat, in the sense of ending its slumber and re-energizing its spirit or *qi* (pronounced: chee). At festivals today, a VIP can be invited to step forward to touch the eyes on a dragon boat head with a brush dipped in red paint in order to reanimate the creature's bold spirit for hearty racing.

Qu Yuan

Main article: [Qu Yuan](#)

The other main legend concerns the poignant [saga](#) of a famous Chinese [patriot poet](#) named Qu Yuan a.k.a. Ch'u Yuen. It is said that he lived in the pre-imperial [Warring States](#) period (475-221 BC). During this time the area today known as central China was divided into seven main states or kingdoms battling among themselves for supremacy with unprecedented heights of [military intrigue](#). This was at the conclusion of the Zhou (Chou) Dynasty period, which is regarded as China's classical age during which Kongzi (Confucius) lived. Also, the author **Sunzi** ([Sun Tzu](#)) is said to have written his famous classic on military strategy [The Art of War](#) during this era.

Qu Yuan is popularly regarded as a [minister](#) in one of the Warring State governments, the southern state of [Chu](#) (present day Hunan and Hubei provinces), a [champion](#) of political loyalty and integrity, and eager to maintain the Chu state's autonomy and hegemony. The Chu [king](#), however, fell under the influence of other corrupt, jealous ministers who slandered Qu Yuan as 'a sting in flesh'. So the fooled king banished QU, his most loyal counselor.

In Qu's [exile](#), so goes the legend, he supposedly produced some of the greatest early [poetry](#) in [Chinese literature](#) expressing his fervent love for his state and his deepest concern for its future. The collection of odes are known as the *Chuci* or "Songs of the South (Chu)". His most well known verses are the rhapsodic *Li Sao* or "Lament" and the fantastic *Tien Wen* or "Heavenly Questions".

In the year 278 B.C., upon learning of the upcoming devastation of his state from invasion by a neighbouring Warring State (Qin in particular), Qu is said to have waded into the [Miluo river](#) in today's [Hunan](#) Province holding a great rock in order to commit ritual suicide as a form of protest against the corruption of the era. The Qin or Chin kingdom eventually conquered all of the other states and unified them into the first Chinese empire. The word China derives from Chin.

The common people, upon learning of his suicide, rushed out on the water in their fishing boats to the middle of the river and tried desperately to save Qu Yuan. They beat drums and splashed the water with their paddles in order to keep the fish and evil spirits from his body. Later on, they scattered rice into the water to prevent him from suffering hunger. Another belief is that the people scattered rice to feed the fish, in order to prevent the fishes from devouring the poet's body.

However, late one night, the spirit of Qu Yuan appeared before his friends and told them that the rice meant for him was being intercepted by a huge river dragon. He asked his friends to wrap their rice into three-cornered silk packages to ward off the dragon. This has been a traditional food ever since known as [zongzi](#) or sticky rice wrapped in leaves, although they are wrapped in leaves instead of [silk](#). In commemoration of Qu Yuan it is said, people hold dragon boat races annually on the day of his death.

Today, dragon boat festivals continue to be celebrated around the world with dragon boat racing, although such events are still culturally associated with the traditional Chinese Tuen Ng Festival in

Hong Kong (Cantonese Chinese dialect) or **Duan Wu** festival in south central mainland China (Mandarin Chinese dialect).

Dragon boat racing as a modern sport

Modern dragon boat racing is organised at an international level by the [International Dragon Boat Federation](#) (IDBF). The IDBF recognises two types of Dragon Boat Racing activities, namely *sport racing, as practised by IDBF member organisations; and *festival racing, which are the more traditional and informal types of races, organised around the world, where racing rules vary from event to event.

- A festival race is typically a sprint event of several hundred metres, with 500 metres being a standard distance in many international festival races. There are also some very long [endurance](#) events, such as the [Three Gorges Dam](#) Rally along the [Yangtze River](#) (or Chang Jiang) near [Yichang](#), [Hubei](#) province, China, which covers up to 100 kilometres.
- Sport racing distances are normally over 200m or 250m, 500m, 1000m and 2000m, with formal Rules of Racing.

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Popularity

Due to the long history of dragon boat racing in China, participants in cultural and racing events there number some 50 million people (on a population base of over 1 billion souls). Over the past 25 years, and especially since the formation of the IDBF and its Continental Federations for Asia and Europe (see below), the [sport](#) of dragon boating has gradually spread beyond Asia to Europe, North America, Australia and Africa, becoming a popular international sport with a growing number of participants.

Today, dragon boat racing (sport and festival) is among the fastest growing of team water sports, with tens of thousands of participants in various organisations and clubs in around 60 countries - most of which are IDBF members or applicants for Membership. The sport is recognised for the camaraderie, strength and endurance fostered amongst participants, and it has also become a very popular corporate and charitable sport.

One of the biggest events outside [Asia](#) is the [Toronto International Dragon Boat Festival](#) held in late June in [Toronto, Ontario](#).

Organisations

The established dragon boat sporting organisations are the IDBF, the international governing body, and its continental federations, the European Dragon Boat Federation (EDBF) and the Asian Dragon Boat Federation (ADBF). IDBF member associations or federations have been established in over 50 countries, since 1991 (eg. China DBA, Hong Kong DBA, Chinese Taipei DBA, Macau DBA, Singapore DBA, Australian DBF, United States DBF, Dragon Boat Canada, British DB Racing Association, Italian DBF, German DBA, Swiss DBA, South African DBA, Danish DBA, as well as many others).

The IDBF is acknowledged by the [International Olympic Committee](#) (IOC), the [World Anti Doping Agency](#) (WADA), and the [General Association of International Sports Federations](#) (GAISF) as the

World Governing Body for Dragon Boat Sport and the ADBF is recognised by the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) as the Asian Continental Governing Body for Dragon Boat Racing.

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Racing events

The IDBF has organised World Dragon Boat Racing Championships (WDBRC) for Representative National or Territorial teams every two years since 1995. In between world championship years, IDBF Club Crew World Championships (CCWC) are held for the world's top club-based crews.

[2006 CCWC](#) will take place at the brand new [Western Beaches Watercourse](#), just off scenic Marilyn Bell Park in Toronto's west end. A 10-minute drive or 30 to 40-minute walk from downtown Toronto, the site is also easily accessible by Toronto's public transit system [TTC](#).

Not only will the event offer four days of exciting competition, cultural entertainment, activities for kids, and more, admission is FREE for all. Spectators and dragon boat fans from across North America – and the world – are expected to come out and spend the day on Toronto's beautiful waterfront and cheer on their favourite Dragon Boat crews.

In 2005 the IDBF introduced a Corporate and Community World Championships (WCorcom) designed for crews that normally race in Festival Races and aimed at the 'weekend warrior' type of competitor and not the elite International standard or serious Club Crew competitor.

Both the ADBF and EDBF also hold National Team Championships on alternate years to the IDBF WDBRC and the EDBF have held Club Crew Championships since 1992.

World 'Nations' Dragon Boat Racing Championships

- Yueyang, Hunan province, China, 1995
- Hong Kong, 1997 (2 weeks before Hong Kong was returned to Chinese sovereignty)
- Nottingham, United Kingdom, 1999
- Philadelphia, USA, 2001
- Poznan, Poland, 2003 (World Nations Dragon Boat Championships - proxy event for SARS-cancelled Shanghai World Championships)
- Shanghai, China, 2004 (Re-awarded to Shanghai post-SARS)
- Berlin, Germany, 2005
- Sydney, Australia, 2007 - dates 19-23 September 2007
- Moscow, Russia, 2009 (Provisional)

Club Crew World Dragon Boat Championships

- Vancouver, Canada, 1996
- Wellington, New Zealand, 1998
- Rome, Italy, 2002
- Cape Town South Africa, 2004
- [Toronto, Canada, 2006](#)
- Penang, Malaysia, 2008

- World Corporate and Community Dragon Boat Championships

- ▶ Welland, Niagara, Canada, 2007 (late July - dates to be confirmed)
- ▶ International 'Festival' Dragon Boat Races.

The oldest International Festival Races are those held in [Hong Kong](#) annually. The HKIR have been held since 1976 and are acknowledged as starting the modern era of the dragon boat sport.

The biggest dragon boat festival racing events outside of Asia are in Europe, particularly in Malmö, Sweden and in the USA and [Canada](#). [Ottawa](#), [Vancouver](#), [Toronto](#) and [Montreal](#) each host races featuring more than 180 25-person crews. These races take place over two days in mid-to-late June in correspondence with the 5th Day of the 5th Month custom