



The Heavenly Dragon

The history and growth of dragon boating

The dragon plays the most acclaimed role within the Chinese mythological tradition. Dragons are traditionally believed to be the rulers of rivers and seas and dominate the clouds and the rains of heaven. 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.

A dragon boat is a very long and narrow human powered boat used in the team paddling sport of dragon boat racing. For events, dragon boats are rigged with decorative Chinese dragon heads and tails and carry a large drum aboard.

The legend

The use of dragon boats for racing are believed by anthropologists to have originated in southern central China more than 2,500 years ago, traditionally held to commemorate the death of Qu Yuan making dragon boating the only sport to be celebrated as a national holiday.

It is said that Qu Yuan lived in the state of Chu during the pre-imperial Warring States period (475-221 BC). During this time central China was divided into seven states battling among themselves for supremacy. Qu produced some of the greatest early poetry in Chinese literature expressing his fervent love for his state and his concern for its future. In 278 BC, upon learning of the upcoming invasion of Chu by a neighbouring state, Qu is said to have waded into the Miluo River holding a great rock in order to commit ritual suicide as a form of protest.

The common people rushed out to the middle of the river in their fishing boats 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.

Dragon boat racing as a modern sport

Modern dragon boat racing is organized at an international level by the International Dragon Boat Federation (IDBF). The IDBF recognizes two types of dragon boat racing activities, namely sport racing, as practiced by IDBF member organizations; and festival racing, which are the more traditional and informal types of races, organized around the world, where racing rules vary from event to event.



Popularity

Since the formation of the IDBF, 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.

The Hong Kong Tourism Bureau has moved dragon boat racing into the modern era by donating teak dragon boats to countries around the world. In 1986, the Hong Kong Pavilion at Expo 86 donated 4 teak dragon boats to the city of Vancouver, British Columbia. Community leaders in Vancouver saw the potential in creating a fun multicultural event and festival, giving birth to the Canadian International Dragon Boat Festival, now known as the Alcan Dragon Boat Festival.

Today, dragon boat racing is among the fastest growing of team water sports, with tens of thousands of participants in various organizations and clubs in 60 countries - most of which are IDBF members.

The crew of the dragon boat

The standard crew of a contemporary dragon boat is 22, comprising of 20 paddlers in pairs facing toward the bow of the boat, 1 drummer at the bow facing toward the paddlers, and 1 steer person at the rear of the boat.

The drummer is considered the "heartbeat" of the dragon boat, and leads the crew throughout a race with the rhythmic drumming to indicate the timing and frequency of paddling strokes. The steer person controls the dragon boat with a steering oar similar in function to a tiller, which is mounted at the rear of the boat. The steer person may work with the drummer to call out commands during a race.