

# Dragon Boat History

## *Phase 1: Medieval jingdù, or "competitive crossing"*

The earliest boat races in China were rooted in training for naval warfare. The earliest records show that the people of the region that is now southern China and Southeast Asia used oared longboats for fighting and for demonstrating their military prowess. Oared longboats were fast and manoeuvrable, and they functioned on water rather as light cavalry did on land: for reconnaissance and patrol, for "special operations" duty behind enemy lines, and, in units of several hundred boats for occasional massed attacks on rival squadrons or even against much larger armadas of troop-transport and siege vessels. Success in such tactics, especially in often narrow and challenging water environments, required coordinated, high-speed rowing for each boat, and coordinated manoeuvres for whole boat squadrons, which in turn required training. With this, boat racing was born.

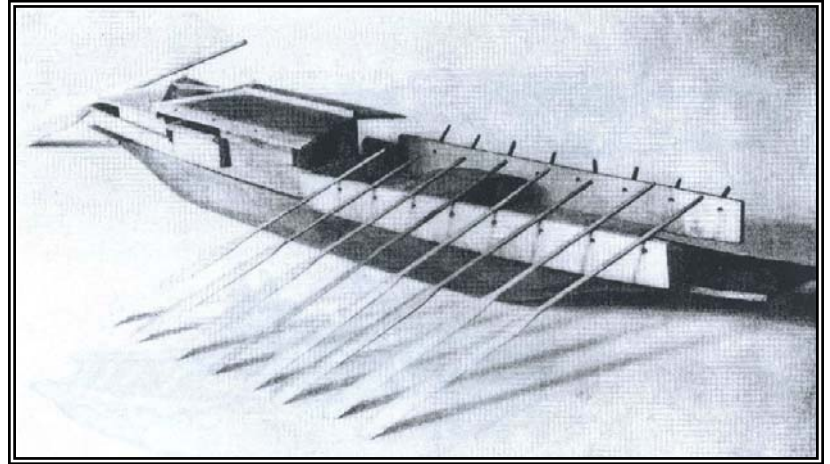


Figure 1: Boat model of a (non-military) oared longboat, from the second century AD

The earliest evidence of boat racing being used as an exhibition sport comes from around 550 AD, in the form of a staged mock battle called *jingdu* (jeeng-DOO), which means "competitive crossing." Oared longboats with teams of about thirty men would fight to gain the crossing of a river in an event that was part race and part combat. *Jingdu* events were staged in the late spring or early summer in military garrison towns in the central Yangzi region (modern Hubei and Hunan), and eventually spread to other regions of what is now southern China over the next several hundred years. The northern-based Tang imperial court, which conquered the Yangzi valley in the 600s, began to stage *jingdu* events for entertainment, using much more ornately-decorated boats.

## *Phase 2: Late imperial dragon boat racing*

Starting in the late 800s, the imperial Tang dynasty collapsed and a series of short-lived local military regimes fought for control of the south. They began to use *jingdu* races as a recruitment and training tool for their naval forces, and the practice was adopted by the new northern-based Song Empire when they conquered the south in the 960s and 970s. During the next several centuries of Song rule, boat racing became a competitive sport in which the winners were promoted into the imperial navy at the capital (Kaifeng, now in Henan province). Imperial naval forces staged races for imperial review at a large lake west of the city. The imperial boats were always decorated like dragons, which symbolized imperial authority; as a result, other decorations (birds, tigers, and other animals and designs) fell out of use, and the races began to be called "dragon boat *jingdu*" or just "dragon boat competitions."

The Song dynasty was forced to flee south of the Yangzi river, and eventually was conquered by the Mongols in the late 1200s. Over the following centuries, the imperial courts of the Ming and Qing (Manchu) dynasties stopped sponsoring dragon boat racing as a tool for naval recruitment, and the races became entirely local affairs. Races continued to be often more like a mid-river brawl, and participants began using paddles which allowed them to pack men more tightly into the boats, and to more effectively engage in hand-to-hand combat. An "arms race" developed in some regions, with boats becoming as long as 30 meters (about 100 feet) or more and packed with eighty men. Paddling styles included sitting, kneeling, and standing, sometimes with several styles all used at once on the same boat.



Figure 2: Twelfth century AD painting of imperial naval review showing dragon boats surrounding a Great Dragon Ship

### Phase 3: The development of modern dragon boat racing

In the 19th century, powerful European nations such as Britain and France used their superior military power to control territory and economic privileges in the Qing (Manchu) Empire, leading to increased pressure for reform.

Dragon boat racing was seen by most officials as a corrupt custom that disrupted water transport and led to gambling and fighting, and was often repressed, though it remained widely practiced. Some reformers thought that it could be turned into a modern sport and would contribute to a stronger, prouder nation. Some efforts were made in this direction in the 1920s to 1950s, but the Communist government decided it represented old feudal customs and banned it in the early 1960s.

In 1976 the British-controlled government of Hong Kong began to develop dragon boat racing as a sport to encourage tourism. Over the next ten years, other locations around the world (especially in developed Asia, Europe, and Canada) began holding festival races on the Hong Kong model. They developed a style using a relatively short boat, 12m long, with 20 seated paddlers, a drummer at the front, and one person on the steering oar at the rear. An alternative style used an even shorter boat with only 10 paddlers.

The races became a popular club sport, leading to the development of several national associations in the late 1980s. In 1991, the International Dragon Boat Federation (IDBF) was established in Hong Kong, constituted out of 12 national committees, including China. The IDBF went on to publish by-laws, rules & regulations, and full technical specifications for the modern sport, which is now practiced in over sixty countries worldwide.

Meanwhile, with the opening of China to reform and international influence in the late 1970s, traditional-style dragon boat races began to be revived in local communities all over China, a process which has continued to this day. The international IDBF-standard races are also increasingly popular in China as well, so that it is quite common to find both traditional and modern international styles races being held in the same area.

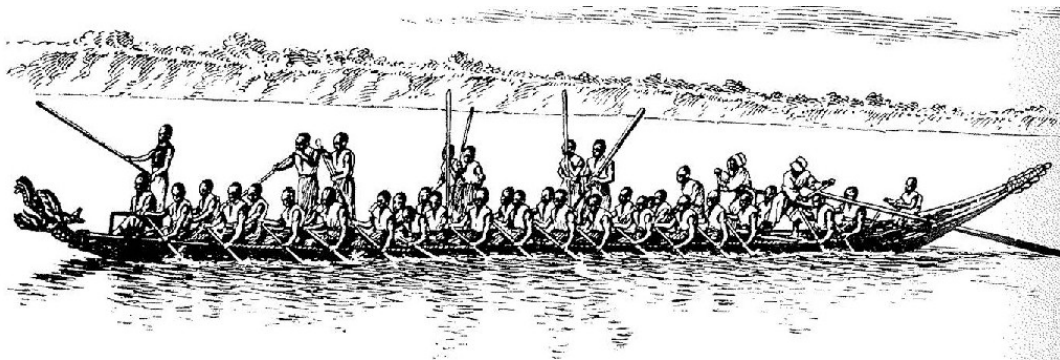


Figure 3: Sketch of an early twentieth-century dragon boat on the Yangzi river near Wuhan, Hubei province

## Dragon Boat Legends & Rituals

### Remembering Qu Yuan

Qu Yuan is one of China's most famous poets, who is supposed to have died by drowning himself in the Miluo river in 278 BC. He had been a high official at the court of the southern state of Chu (in modern Hubei and Hunan provinces), and had seen the danger of an alliance with the tyrannical state of Qin (based in modern Shaanxi province). However, his king listened to corrupt advisors instead, and sent Qu Yuan into exile in the south. There Qu Yuan composed lyric poetry based on local shaman songs. When the court of Chu was destroyed by Qin, the distraught Qu Yuan committed suicide.



Figure 4: A 20th-century painting of Qu Yuan

There are many different legends which associate Qu Yuan's with dragon boat racing. The very earliest story, which was first recorded in the early 7th century AD, almost nine hundred years after the poet's death, goes as follows:

*On the full moon of the fifth lunar month [around mid-summer], Qu Yuan went to the Miluo river {to commit suicide}. The local people followed him to Dongting Lake but could not find him. The lake was large, their boats were small, and they could not get across. They sang, 'How shall we get across the lake?' Then, drumming their oars, they vied to return, competing to {be first to} assemble at the pavilion. This practice was handed down, and became the performance of 'competing to cross' (jingdu). Their swift paddles move quickly together, sounds of oar and song echoing across {the water}, the noise shaking water and land, those watching gathered like clouds.*

Another story, first recorded around the same time, tries to explain why people throw rice balls stuffed into bamboo or leaf wrappings (called zongzi) into the water at Duanwu, the midsummer festival, traditionally celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, but also celebrated on the full moon of that month. According to this tale, local people made rice offerings to Qu Yuan at the Miluo river for centuries after his death. In the first century AD, however, Qu Yuan's ghost appeared to a local man, who told him that evil water spirits had stolen all the offerings, and recommended that the rice be wrapped in special leaves and five-coloured silk, to scare away the spirits. The man did as he was told, and it became the local tradition. A second version of this story, first recorded in the tenth century, gives the credit to Qu Yuan's wife: "She always threw food into the river as an offering. In a dream she was told that the food offerings were all consumed by an evil water spirit. It was afraid of five-coloured silk and bamboo, so the wife used bamboo to make zongzi and wrapped them in five-coloured silk. Now the custom on this day is for everyone to do this, and there's no more trouble from evil water spirits." Even later versions of this story claim that the boatmen themselves threw rice or other food into the water to feed the fish, so they would not eat Qu Yuan's body.

In fact, there is no evidence that Qu Yuan died at the time of the Duanwu festival, in mid-summer, nor any evidence that boatmen tried to rescue his body. However, the story was very compelling, and particularly appealed to well-educated men who knew the legends and poems of Qu Yuan well. Since they often were the sponsors of boat races, it became fairly common for elements of Qu Yuan's life story and poetry to be associated with the boats and the races. In some places, especially along the southeast coast (Fujian and Guangdong provinces) and Taiwan, Qu Yuan is worshiped as the "Venerated King of Water Immortals," and dragon boat races were dedicated to him, traditions which survive to this day.

In the early 20th century, many Chinese intellectuals were newly attracted to the life and poetry of Qu Yuan, for he represented uncompromising principles, love of country, and a close association with the common people. As a result, he became more strongly associated with dragon boat racing, which was a popular local tradition in southern China, but not part of elite culture. In the early Communist period (the 1950s), Qu Yuan was widely celebrated as one of China's greatest heroes, and dragon boat races were sponsored in his honour.

For more information, visit:

<http://www.dragonboathistory.com/History.html>

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