Shanghai, China

Dragon Boat Festival

By Tom Kirvan

CULTURE, COMPETITION, AND COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHT ANNUAL CHINESE BOAT FESTIVAL

Every year in late May and early June, the vibrant city of Shanghai comes alive with one of China's most exhilarating traditional celebrations: the Dragon Boat Festival (or Duanwu Festival). This annual event combines ancient cultural heritage with dynamic sport and citywide festivities. While the official public holiday falls on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month on the traditional calendar, many of Shanghai's most popular activities take place across May and June as communities celebrate along its waterways.

The Dragon Boat Festival is one of China's most enduring traditions, with a history stretching back more than 2,000 years. It commemorates the ancient poet Qu Yuan, a patriotic figure who, according to legend, ended his life in the Miluo River as an expression of love for his homeland. Villagers rushed out in boats to search for him and beat drums to scare away fish and evil spirits, a story that is now embodied in modern dragon boat racing. Aside from the races, traditional customs include eating zongzi (glutinous rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves), hanging mugwort and calamus leaves, and wearing colorful pouches for good luck and health.

In Shanghai, this ancient festival retains its traditional significance, even as it has evolved into a contemporary urban celebration that blends sport, culture, and community gatherings.

FEATURED ACTIVITIES IN SHANGHAI

At the heart of Shanghai's festivities are the dragon boat races that take place on several of the city's waterways. These high-energy races feature long, narrow boats adorned with dragon heads and tails, paddled by teams of 12 to 22 participants to the rhythmic beat of drums. Races are held in various locations around the city, including Suzhou Creek, where the Shanghai Suzhou Creek Dragon Boat Invitational Tournament attracts competitors and supporters alike in early June.

In addition to the competitive races, Shanghai's Dragon Boat Festival features a wide array of cultural and community activities. The Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism regularly organizes dozens of holiday-related events, often more than 200, including dragon boat culture festivals, festive garden parties, night events celebrating Han

A SHANGHAI CONNECTION FOR PRIMERUS MEMBERS

Primerus has a member law firm in China, **Watson & Band**, located in Shanghai, scope of practice includes various areas such as intellectual property; corporate and commercial law; data law and IP services; financial and asset management; real estate and infrastructure; labor and employment; family law and wealth management; trade, customs and tax; litigation and dispute resolution; and more.

Image credit: inspirits (2021 June 12). A traditional dragon boat is being prepared for a race on Meilan Lake during Dragon Boat Festival in Shanghai, China [Photograph]. Shutterstock. Retrieved May 29, 2026 from **Shutterstock**

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traditions, food markets, and themed performances around town. These activities celebrate traditional culture while inviting locals and visitors to experience Shanghai's lively urban atmosphere in the early summer.

In some districts, such as Chongming, the festival also highlights intangible cultural heritage through performances, exhibitions, and local crafts that celebrate the deeper cultural roots of Duanwu customs.

POPULARITY AND COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Shanghai's Dragon Boat Festival is enormously popular with both residents and visitors, blending traditional Chinese customs with a festive communal atmosphere that appeals to people of all ages. The city's status as a global metropolis means the celebrations are not limited to local participation: international teams sometimes attend dragon boat races, and tourists flock to the city to enjoy the spectacle and the surrounding cultural events.

Part of the festival's charm lies in this intermingling of culture, sport, and everyday life. On race days, spectators line the riverbanks to cheer on teams, enjoy the spectacle of colorfully decorated boats, and partake in food stalls and markets that feature traditional snacks like zongzi and beverages favored during the season. Many families use the festival as an occasion to spend time together outdoors, making it a highlight of the early summer calendar in Shanghai.

While the festival is rooted in tradition, its modern iteration has significant economic impact on Shanghai's economy, particularly in terms of tourism, leisure, and local business revenue.

- **Tourism Boost:** The timing of the festival – in late spring to early summer, before peak summer travel – helps attract visitors who might extend their stays to explore cultural and historical attractions in the city. Increased hotel bookings and transportation use during festival periods contribute to tourism revenue.
- **Local Business Revenue:** Restaurants, cafés, and street vendors benefit from the influx of festival-goers, especially those located along the riverbanks and near popular race venues. Traditional foods and specialty drinks see a surge in sales, and many eateries create festival-themed menus.
- **Cultural Commerce:** Pop-up markets and cultural stalls that showcase local crafts, dragon boat memorabilia, and traditional attire help support artisans and small business owners. These vendors often see their highest sales of the season during festival events.
- **Community Engagement:** The festival fosters community engagement and seasonal employment opportunities, as event setups, crowd services, and hospitality venues hire additional staff to meet demand during peak days.

More than a sporting spectacle, Shanghai's Dragon Boat Festival is a living expression of China's enduring cultural heritage, adapted to the rhythms of one of the world's most dynamic cities. By blending ancient tradition with contemporary festivity, it celebrates communal spirit, athleticism, and cultural memory, all while contributing meaningfully to the city's economic vibrancy.