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Enter the Dragon

端午賽龍舟

BY DANA TER

Enjoying the Dragon Boat Festival in Taipei

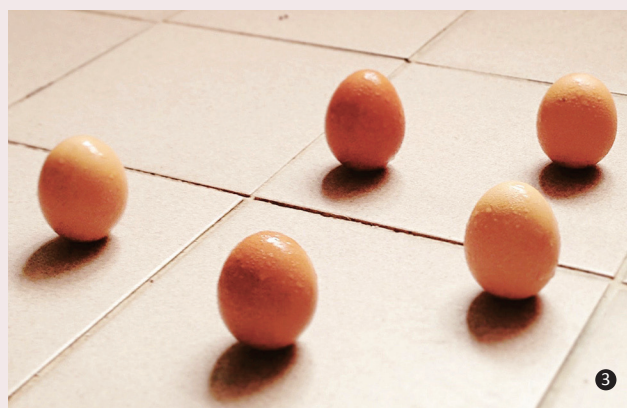


It's well above 30 degrees Celsius and the sun is blazing down on the dozens of brilliantly painted dragon boats powering through the Keelung River by Taipei's Dajia Riverside Park. Rowers, 20 or so in each boat and clad in life vests and hats, paddle their oars ferociously, keeping up with the pace set by the drummer who sits up front and clasps a wooden stick in each hand, each strike to the drum sending a thundering ripple through the river. A team member perched on the front of the boat stretches out to grab a flag from a buoy floating by the finish line. On the riverbank, spectators take refuge under canopies and cheer loudly as the colorful boats zip by.

The Dragon Boat Festival is one of the biggest holidays in Taiwan and it's celebrated all over the island with days-long races and other festivities, such as eating *zongzi* or sticky rice dumplings. At Dajia Riverside Park, over 200 teams from around Taiwan and the world compete each year; held on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, this year's festival kicks off on June 7.

Though in Taiwan it's been celebrated since the Qing dynasty, the history of the Dragon Boat Festival dates back much longer. Over 2,000 years ago, during the Warring States period in China, there lived a poet named Qu Yuan who was also a minister to the Chu emperor. Qu spent much of this career fighting corruption, but his intentions were not well received, and even caused other officials to spread rumors about him. Qu lost the trust of the Chu emperor, who later exiled him. During his exile, Qu heard that the Qin state had conquered the Chu, and saddened, he drowned himself in the Miluo River.

Concerned villagers brought their boats out to the river to rescue Qu but found his floating corpse instead. The men beat their oars against the water to scare fish away, while the women wrapped sticky rice inside bamboo leaves and threw them in the river to stop the fish from eating his corpse. In other retellings of the story, the *zongzi* was an offering to Qu's spirit.



1~2. Dragon-boat racing in Taipei is a must-see tradition during the Dragon Boat Festival. | 3. According to tradition, an egg can easily be balanced on its end at noon on the day of Dragon Boat Festival. | 4. In addition to dragon-boat racing and egg-standing, eating *zongzi* (sticky rice dumplings) is a quintessential Dragon Boat Festival activity.

1~2. 龍舟競賽是台北端午嘉年華不可錯過的精采傳統賽事。 | 3. 「立蛋」是端午節的傳統活動，相傳端午的正午時分，可輕鬆讓蛋立起。 | 4. 除了賽龍舟與立蛋，粽子是端午節必嚐的傳統美食。

Steamed or boiled, *zongzi* is still eaten today as a part of the Dragon Boat Festival, and food vendors set up shop near the riverbank to sell these delectable, triangle-shaped snacks stuffed with salted egg, peanuts, pork, squid, and mushrooms. At Dajia Riverside Park, there are DIY *zongzi* stations and activities for children, including face painting and egg-balancing contests.

Although handcrafted boats are becoming increasingly rare, the dragon-boat industry is still booming, especially since teams commission new boats every year. These days, most dragon boats are made from fiberglass instead of wood, then hand-painted in bold colors and designs. Right before the race, the dragon's eyes are dotted — a tradition that dates back to ancient times and is said to “awaken” the dragon.

Besides the event at Dajia Riverside Park, the festival also draws big crowds in other cities. In Lukang, in Changhua County, the races take place for about a month at the Fulu River, which allows ample time for visitors to drop by. Over in Jiaoxi, in Yilan County, the Erlong River race is more of a popularity contest. There are no designated start and finish lines and no referees; instead, spectators decide the winning team based on rowing skill, team spirit, and charisma. And therein lies the spirit of the Dragon Boat Festival: an opportunity to bask in the heat, eat dumplings, cheer and hoot, and have a good time. 🎉

