

# Dragon boating shows Guangdong's dynamic, enthusiastic spirit

Traditional activity resonates down millenniums and spark goes on across country and beyond borders

GD TODAY

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The 2024 Guangzhou International Dragon Boat Invitational Tournament was held on the Pearl River in Guangzhou, capital of South China's Guangdong province on Sunday.

As one of the best dragon boat competitions in the world, this year's tournament attracted 111 teams and involved nearly 4,000 competitors. They included 16 international teams from countries including the United States, Canada, Malaysia, Kazakhstan and one of the team was represented by the foreign chambers of commerce in Guangzhou. Also, teams from the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions, as well as six neighboring cities including Foshan, Huizhou and Dongguan took part in the annual event.

The Datang Wujia dragon boat team from Guangzhou's Haizhu district won gold in the men's open category. The team was established in 1979 and has won several titles over the years. In 2023, it won the championship in the same category. Altybek Smaikhan, captain of Kazakhstan Knights Dragon Boat Team, said: "Because I love dragon boat racing so much, I chose to come to China and live in Guangdong. The province boasts excellent conditions for this sports event and I can learn a lot here. There are also many com-

petitions, you could say that Guangdong is the best place for dragon boat racing." David Butler, captain of Guangzhou International Dragon Boat Team, said: "This is a great window into local Guangdong culture, or Cantonese culture. This is a great way to connect with the local community. I love the spirit of dragon boating, a positive, dynamic and enthusiastic spirit." The Guangzhou International Dragon Boat Invitational Tournament is one of the most anticipated events of this year's dragon

boat season in Guangdong. The activity, running more than a month, kicked off on May 18 in Dongguan, marking the start of dragon boat races held across the province. A traditional custom of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, dragon boat racing is also an intangible cultural heritage item in Guangdong and embodies the region's Lingnan culture. Today, it not only serves as a classic festival activity but a symbol of the spirit of unity, perseverance and struggle for excellence. Another event of the dragon boat season

was a dragon boat drift racing competition held on June 8 in Diejiao village, Nanhai district, Foshan city. Unlike traditional races on wide rivers, this competition takes place on narrow and winding waterways. Each 25-meter-long dragon boat carries 30 to 40 competitors and they paddle the boat to drift through bends, under bridges and make sharp turns. The competition attracted more than 150 athletes to challenge the 10-kilometer course, which includes a variety of bends.

Statistics show that Guangdong has been hosting 127 dragon boat events around this year's festival and the oldest dragon boat festival is 592 years old. Race teams include a women's team with an average age of 50+, young teams mainly composed of the post-2000 generation and international teams formed by foreigners living, working and studying in Guangdong. Li Kaifan, an inheritor of the dragon boat racing intangible cultural heritage item in Guangzhou's Liwan district, believes that dragon boat racing conveys the spirit of

progress and unity among participants, and maintains friendship between neighbors. In recent years, Li has introduced dragon boat culture into schools and residential communities, and briefed the public about related sports and customs. Chen Yonglue, a member of a dragon boat association in Foshan's Shunde district, said: "Dragon boat rowing can increase cohesion of the people, because everyone is on the same boat." The 30-year-old supports the promotion

of dragon boat culture and welcomes people from other regions and countries to watch related activities. Wei Wei, the executive deputy secretary-general of the Guangdong Dragon Boat Association, said Guangdong is the only province in China that can host traditional dragon boat races throughout the year. "Thanks to its climate and water systems, Guangdong has strong public support and the most comprehensive dragon boat club system in the country, with diverse competition formats," Wei said.

During this year's dragon boat season, cities in Guangdong have integrated folk customs, cuisine and finance to host dragon boat cultural tourism festivals. They are aimed at promoting folk culture and transforming this into economic benefits. Experts suggest that Guangdong should develop experiential, interactive and immersive consumption scenarios to create a more complete industry chain of the "dragon boat economy" in a bid to give traditional customs new significance and boost urban economic development.



ILLUSTRATION BY LIN YAQI / FOR CHINA DAILY

## Regatta's unstoppable rise pulls people together from across the world

By YUAN SHENGGAO

As part and parcel of the annual traditional Duanwu Festival celebrations, dragon boat races are held across China. Recent years have seen a growing international involvement in the traditional boating activities of Guangdong province.

Among them is a group of overseas students from the School of International Education at Shantou University. They competed at a dragon boat race held during this year's Duanwu Festival (aka Dragon Boat Festival), running from June 8 to 10, in Shantou, Guangdong province.

Also, an international dragon boat invitation tournament held on Sunday in Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong, attracted boating teams from the United States, Canada, Malaysia



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and Kazakhstan, as well as China's Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions.

### Membership change

One of the teams was comprised of members from the foreign chambers of commerce in Guangzhou but mostly by those from the Guangzhou International Dragon Boat Club. The club was founded in 1998 when its membership consisted of employees from consulates in Guangzhou. However, there has been a significant change in its membership. Originally, staff members from consulates served as the backbone of the club but currently just two or three consulate employees remain. The majority of the club membership are foreigners living in Guangzhou, including teachers and businesspeople.

David Butler from the United Kingdom is the general manager of the Guangzhou International Dragon Boat Club, who has been paddling for 14 years.

"Dragon boat is a team sport. It is a fantastic exercise. You can exercise more than you would if you were on your own," he told GD Today in a recent interview when he tried dragon boat drift in Foshan, Guangdong province. "You push each other,

encourage and inspire each. There is always a positive feeling."

"When I first came to Guangzhou, I learned how to dragon boat because I was interested. Now, dragon boating has become a part of my life and it links me with Guangzhou."

Butler has participated in dragon boat races in many places in the world. "Many people worldwide are very interested in China and they want to know more about Chinese culture. Nowadays, there are dragon boat races almost all over the world and dragon boats can really promote cultural exchanges."

### Growing popularity

Although dragon boat racing is a traditional Chinese cultural activity, it has gained in popularity worldwide, which is evidenced by related international competitions.

The International Dragon Boat Federation was established in Hong Kong in 1991. Its membership has more than 80 dragon boat associations from countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Italy, Malaysia, Norway, the Philippines, Singapore and the United States, according to its official website.

In recent years, dragon boats from Guangdong have sailed overseas,

achieving excellent results in international competitions and showcasing their prowess to the world.

Among the Guangdong dragon boat racers at overseas regattas was a team from Nansha district of Guangzhou at the Frankfurt Dragon Boat Festival on May 25. Of the 21 racers in the team, eight are women.

The team from Guangzhou got through to the final, ranking third in the preliminary rounds and won third place in the professional group. It was also awarded by the organizing committee for its "outstanding contributions".

More than 23 dragon boat teams comprising nearly 460 athletes competed at the race in Germany. The racers were from China, Germany, Italy, France and other countries and regions.

The Guangzhou team is not a newcomer to international regattas. It won the championship at the Darwin International Dragon Boat Festival in Australia in June 2023.

In late June, two teams from Dongguan, Guangdong province, are to head out to Switzerland and Denmark for dragon boat competitions.

One of the two teams is from Hongmei township of the city. It will participate in a dragon boat race in

Egisau, a Swiss medieval town.

The event is jointly organized by the Drachenboot Club Egisau and dragonboatevents website, and has been held for 31 years. It is the longest-running and largest annual dragon boat race in Europe, and one of the most popular events in Zurich, Switzerland.

The other team is from Zhongtang township, Dongguan. It will compete in the professional category of the Copenhagen Dragon Boat Cultural Festival in Denmark on June 23 and 24.

The event in Copenhagen has so far been held for seven editions. As a prestigious international event known for its high standards and professionalism, it attracts top talent from various countries and regions to prove their mettle in intense competition.

Prior to this, another dragon boat team from Shatian township, Dongguan, has made a splash in overseas competitions. The team won five championships at Asian races and other international competitions.

Shatian township is also where the country's first women's dragon boat team is from, which was founded in 1996.

In August 1999, the women's dragon boat team claimed the championship across all three women's events at the third World Dragon Boat Racing Championships held in Nottingham, the United Kingdom.

Dragon boat racing in Guangdong has gained more attention and support in recent years. BYD, a new energy vehicle brand headquartered in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, signed a cooperation agreement with the International Canoe Federation and the Chinese Canoe Association in Shenzhen to jointly promote the inclusion of dragon boat racing in international competitions.

### Extensive attention

Dragon boat racing in Guangdong has gained more attention and support in recent years. BYD, a new energy vehicle brand headquartered in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, signed a cooperation agreement with the International Canoe Federation and the Chinese Canoe Association in Shenzhen to jointly promote the inclusion of dragon boat racing in international competitions.

The move is expected to aid the integration of dragon boat racing into the ICF Canoe Sprint World Cup and the official competition events of the World Games 2025 in Chengdu, Sichuan province, promoting dragon boat racing.

Following the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, dragon boat racing will once again be showcased as a demonstration event during this year's Games in Paris.

### Event to offer experience like no other

GD Today, a subsidiary of Nanfang Media Group, will host a dragon boat culture promotion at Liedie village in Tianhe district of Guangzhou, Guangdong province, on June 29, inviting both Chinese and foreign friends to delve into the essence of Guangdong's dragon boat culture.

The event will feature a racing experience, a cultural product fair and a culinary and cultural feast.

GD Today reporters will cover an international dragon boat invitational, recording how participating teams get up close and personal with the passion and challenge of dragon boat racing and their efforts and progress on the Pearl River, as well as their exciting and emotional moments.

A cultural and creative exhibition focusing on dragon boat trends will be held at Liedie Ancestral Hall, showcasing an array of dragon boat culture-related exhibits such as art toys (collectible figurines), intangible cultural heritage crafts, and cultural and creative lifestyle

products. It aims to infuse new connotations into art toys with dragon boat-based intellectual property, revitalize the traditional dragon boat industry with cultural vigor and expand the cultural industry landscape.

The event will invite foreign friends to have a get-together with Guangdong residents and participants from the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions to taste authentic Cantonese cuisine, tour local ancestral halls and savor dragon boat culture.

The event aims to immerse participants in the "fast and furious" of dragon boat racing, learning about the inheritance and innovative development of Chinese culture, and experiencing the charms of diverse cultures. It is also expected to strengthen the promotion of Guangdong's dragon boat culture, enhance cultural confidence and identity, encourage exchanges and mutual learning between different cultures, and better promote Chinese culture on the global stage, organizers said.



## Long history of sport brings cultural significance

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Evolving from a folk custom, racing is the most important event during the Dragon Boat Festival in the Lingnan region, which roughly refers to the South China region, including Guangdong province. With a history of more than 1,000 years, its inheritance and development embody folk culture and the spirit of teamwork.

Zeng Yingfeng, vice-president of the Culture Association of Guangdong province and an expert in Cantonese folk culture, said the dragon boat paddling custom is not a fixed pattern of behavior. The significance attributed to it is the result of continuous creation by the people based on their own ideas and local resources.

He said that dragon boats are still handmade and rely on manual rowing to this day, a tradition that has lasted for thousands of years. Dragon boat racing represents

the pragmatism and unity of the people of Lingnan. This spirit runs deep and is passed down from generation to generation.

Dragon boat racing is one of the most traditional, participatory and inheritable folk activities in Lingnan, making it an emotionally significant link for overseas Chinese, Zeng added.

Historical records show that during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907-960), there were dragon boat race activities in the West Lake inside the then Guangzhou city. By the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), dragon boat racing during the Dragon Boat Festival in Guangzhou had reached a high level of development.

During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, the tradition then became widespread. Currently, there are 26 intangible cultural heritage projects at the provincial-level or higher related to dragon boats in Guangdong.

The traditional dragon boat paddling ceremony is generally consistent across the Pearl River Delta region. It mainly consists of customs, such as eating *zongzi*, a type of rice dumpling, admiring scenery and competing for the flag.

Among them, the most extensive and grand ceremony involving the participation of the public is admiring the scenery and competing for the flag. Admiring the scenery refers to visiting the villages where one's kinsmen or distant relatives live by paddling dragon boats.

Admiring the scenery activities occur in various villages, according to a customary schedule. It includes processes such as awakening the dragon, worshipping the gods with water, rowing the boat and eating rice dumplings.

Competing for the flag is the attempt to win the championship in dragon boat racing and takes place after the warm-up of admiring the scenery. The competition procedures are complex. Usually, all participating dragon boats gather in one place for the final competition.

In traditional agrarian societies, the number of dragon boats owned by each clan and their competition record reflects the prosperity of a clan and the degree of unity within a community.

Dragon boat racing has transitioned from a spontaneous traditional folk custom to become an organized competitive event. According to records, relevant

departments in Guangzhou began organizing dragon boat races or performances as early as 1953.

The number of participating dragon boats increased year by year, reaching 60 boats by 1961, with the racecourse mostly from Ersha Island on the Pearl River to the Haijiao Red House.

Since 1980, dragon boat racing has been listed as a Chinese national sports event. In 1994, the Guangzhou government designated the fifth day of the fifth lunar month as the Guangzhou Dragon Boating Festival. Every year, dragon boats from countries and regions such as the United States, Australia and Singapore compete on the Pearl River.

On Aug 3, 2021, at the canoeing venue of the Tokyo Olympics, Chinese dragon boats made their debut as a demonstration event, marking the start of the process of dragon boat racing being included in the Olympics.

Dragon boat paddling shares many similarities with rowing and canoeing in terms of technique, and these parallels can open a door for foreign sports enthusiasts with a strong interest in Eastern culture to learn more about China and its customs.