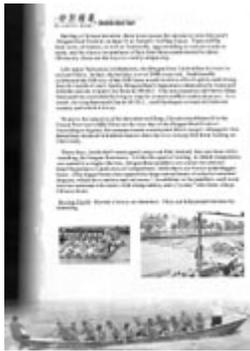


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DRAGON BOAT DAY

By Jennifer Reeder

Barring a Chinese invasion, there is no excuse for anyone to miss this year's Dragon Boat Festival on June 25 at Tainan's An Ping Canal. There will be boat races, of course, as well as food stalls, eggs standing on end precisely at noon, and the chance to purchase a Chen Shui-bian commemorative plate. Obviously, these are the keys to a really unique day.

Like many Taiwanese celebrations, the Dragon Boat Festival has its roots in ancient China. In fact, the holiday is over 2000 years old. Traditionally celebrated the fifth day of the fifth lunar month to drive off evil spirits and strengthen the health of one's family, Dragon Boat's importance dramatically increased with the suicide of poet Chu Yuan in 290 B.C. Chu was a popular advisor to King Huai until he counseled the king to stop his armed conflicts and seek peace. As a result, the king banished Chu in 303 B.C., and Chu began to roam his beloved country and watch it decay.

To prove the sincerity of his devotion to China, Chu drowned himself in the Hunan Province's Milo River on the very day of the Dragon Boat Festival. According to legend, his compassionate countrymen threw zongzi - triangular rice dumplings steamed in bamboo leaves - into the river to keep fish from feeding on Chu's body.

These days, locals don't waste good zongzi on fish; instead, they eat them while watching the Dragon Boat races. Unlike the sport of rowing, in which competitors are seated in a single-file line, Dragon Boat paddlers are seated two abreast. Small boats have six such rows of competitors, while there are nine rows in the bigger boats. (The bigger boats also support the large carved heads of colorful reindeer/dragons, which have antlers and red noses.) In addition to the paddlers, each team also has someone who steers with a long rudder, and a "coxin," who beats a large Chinese drum.

Racing Tip #1: Recruit a heavy-set drummer. They can help propel the boat by bouncing.

Because of the 2000-year history of the event, many Dragon Boat athletes - of all ages and genders - train year-round. But in 1995, a new breed of competitors emerged with the creation of the first team of foreigners in Tainan: The Wibbly Wobblies. In contrast to the rigorous training schedules of returning athletes, this group of pioneers endured "at the most, five days of training," according to former team member Montana Dan. This special team had a sort of mascot, a British-born 30-year-old who claimed his mother wouldn't let him race. But he displayed his commitment to the team by sitting on the sidelines of every training session drinking beer and being sarcastic.

The day of the Finals (there are heats for several days before the Festival), most team members drank beer between races and sized-up their biggest challenge: a team of High School students who refused offers of betel nuts and alcohol. Thanks to inspiration drawn from their motivational cheer, "Wibbly Wobbly, Wibbly

Wobbly...Jelly on a Plate!" they still won a (contested) 5th place trophy. As Montana Dan recalled wistfully, "If we had won, we would've won a bigger trophy."

Racing Tip #2: Secure a paddling bench as close to the front of the boat as possible. The further back you go, the more "stinky" water splashes into your face.

A few days before last year's Dragon Boat Festival, I received a shan bao necklace from one of my students. It was a small stuffed tiger that smelled like catnip. A note attached by his mother (an English teacher) read, "It is a tradition to wear this on Dragon Boat Day, as it is believed to bring health and good fortune all year." I immediately hung it around my neck, and my students explained that the real purpose of the aromatic necklace was to protect my nostrils from the smell of the river on Dragon Boat Day.

It remains to be seen how much has changed since the Wibbly Wobblies blazed a trail for the "Alien Residents" of Tainan back in 1995. For example, will a perfume boat once again spray its sweet-smelling chemicals over the canal to mask the pervasive odor of the water? One thing's for certain: the heat will cause both ice cream and humans to melt. But from children making Dragon Boat hats to the reminiscing of drunken Westerners, from the self-proclaimed "Super" cheerleader routines to the triumphant smiles of the winners, Dragon Boat Festival is an event not to be missed. Plus it's free!

To get to the festivities, drive west on Minsheng Road (parallel to Minsu Road) until it turns into An Ping Road. Park when you see hordes of people with umbrellas.

For competition registration or other information, call: (06) 267-7804.