The Origin of Dragon Boating

The story, best known in modern China, is that the festival commemorates the death of the poet and minister Qu Yuan (c. 340–278 BC) of the ancient state of Chu during the Warring States period of the Zhou Dynasty. A cadet member of the Chu royal house, Qu served in high offices. However, when the king decided to ally with the increasingly powerful state of Qin, Qu was banished for opposing the alliance and even accused of treason. During his exile, Qu Yuan wrote a great deal of poetry. Twenty-eight years later, Qin captured Ying, the Chu capital. In despair, Qu Yuan committed suicide by drowning himself in the Miluo River.

It is said that the local people, who admired him, raced out in their boats to save him or at least retrieve his body. This is said to have been the origin of dragon boat races. When his body could not be found, they dropped balls of sticky rice into the river so that the fish would eat them instead of Qu Yuan's body. Later, the spirit of Qu Yuan is said to have appeared before his friends, he asked them to wrap their rice into three-cornered silk packages to ward off the dragon. These packages became a traditional food known as *zongzi*, rice wrapped in bamboo leaves.

The Dragon Boat Festival is a national holiday in China and is celebrated every year, on the fifth day of the fifth month of the traditional Chinese calendar. The countries around China, such as Vietnam and Korea, also celebrate variations of this Dragon Boat Festival as part of their shared cultural heritage.

2014 Dragon Boat Festival Day – Monday 2 June

Qu Yuan was respected not only by the people during his own time but also after, and not only by people in China but also in the wider world. On March, 5th, 1953, great commemorative activities were held in China in honour of him. In September, the World Peace Council held a meeting to remember him and urged people around the world learn from him. He was also listed as one of the world's four literary celebrities for that year.