

ENTER THE DRAGON BOATS



From China to the Charles

By Linda Matchan

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In any case it's the only city in the United States that has a Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, an event that, in China, is the grandest happening of the summer.

Last year the event was a festival within a festival, part of the gargantuan Cambridge River Festival. On its second birthday, the Dragon Boat event will be a festival in its own right, transporting the spirit and color of China to the shores of the Charles River — at the Hatch Memorial Shell Saturday from 1 to 5 p.m. (Sunday if it rains).

The ancient holiday commemorates the death, about 400 B.C., of a Chou Dynasty poet, Ch'u Yuan, whose writings are "memorized all the time in China," according to Yau Wu Tang, one of the event's organizers. "Almost all Chinese people know his name."

Ch'u Yuan was also known as a patriot who advocated reforms and peace, a man oppressed by jealous ri-

vals who plotted against him and had him banished from the country. So great was his sorrow, the story goes, that Ch'u Yuan drowned himself in a river on the fifth day of the fifth moon of the lunar calendar, a date that falls between May 28 and June 28 on our solar calendar.

In China, the spirit of Ch'u Yuan has been honored for centuries on the anniversary of his death. To ensure that the poet would rest in peace, his bereaved countrymen threw rice into the river, hoping the local fish would gobble up the food and not the ghost of Ch'u Yuan's body.

The ritual became an annual event, later incorporated into a Dragon Boat Festival. And though the people of China have long since stopped feeding the river's fish, they carry on the tradition each year by preparing a delicacy called *zung-ze*, sticky rice wrapped in bamboo leaves and steamed.

Eating is only part of what the festival is about. The event coincides with the period of summer solstice, a time when rain is critical to the newly planted crops. Enter dragons. Stintier as the boats are perceived to be by the Western world, in China they are symbols of power, strength and ener-

gy, and are thought to be responsible for controlling rain.

Over the years a tradition of dragon boat races evolved. Boats are lavishly decorated with giant dragon heads and tails and are raced on rivers to simulate "dragon battles" or thunderstorms that bring on the rain. The races have a doubly symbolic function according to festival coordinator Marcia Iwasaki: The boats disturb the water and the waves disturb the fish, a yearly reminder to all things fanned to let Ch'u Yuan rest in peace.

But it's a long way from ancient China to 20th century Boston. The idea for a Boston Dragon Boat Festival developed spontaneously. Three women — Leslie Swartz and Marcia Iwasaki of the Harvard East Asian Program at the Children's Museum, and Nancy Sato, the after-school program director at Quincy Community School in Chinatown — hatched the plan in December 1978 when they met for coffee one day.

"We thought it would be terrific to have a big festival that would involve Chinese groups . . . and would also be open to non-Asians," says Swartz. "The Dragon Boat Festival is so colorful, yet it had never been done in the United States. And it's so deep in the tradition of China."

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the largest Chinatowns in the United States. But only two festivals are celebrated here — the August Moon Festival and Chinese New Year — and they primarily involve only Chinatown."

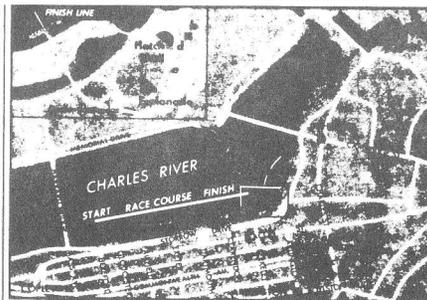
The three women enlisted the help of a few local community groups, including the Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Assn., the Neighborhood Arts Center and the Asian American Resource Workshop.

"One good idea led to another, and it snowballed," Iwasaki says of last year's festival, which attracted an estimated 5000 people. "We never expected it to get to the scale it did."

This year the MDC predicts up to 15,000 people will line the Charles River to join in the festivities and enjoy the many performances. Hundreds of volunteers are participating in the festival, and sponsors have also increased in number; they now include Chinatown Little City Hall, the Chinese Economic Development Council, as well as the Children's Museum.

So what's to do? Festival treasurer and fundraiser S. K. Lowe says an old Chinese proverb provides an appropriate answer: It translates as "once you see it, it's better than 100 tellings."

Organizers agree that the highlight promises to be the dragon boat races. Seven hefty 17-foot lifeboats have been decorated with dragon heads and tails, created by local Chinese community groups, art schools and the sixth grade class of Runkle School



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in Brookline. The boats are made of papier-mache, fiberglass or wood; some will have scales, some will stand 8 feet high; and one (the Massachusetts College of Art's contribution) will roar and blow smoke.

None, however, will have eyes, at least not until 1 p.m. on Saturday. That's when the traditional Ceremony to Open the Dragon's Eyes takes place. Before the dragons hit the water, Chinese and other officials will pen eyes on the dragons to symbolical-

ly give the animals life. There'll be two races, each containing seven crew teams representing Chinese community organizations and local high schools and colleges, covering a half-mile from the Harvard Bridge to the Esplanade at 2 and 3 p.m. The two winners enter the final

race at 5 p.m., bringing the Dragon Boat Festival to a close.

Members of the Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Assn. will demonstrate more than a dozen arts and crafts all afternoon to both adults and children.

Among other things, viewers will learn how to make *zung-ze* dumplings and special decorations that Chinese people adorn their homes with during the Dragon Boat Festival; they'll also see a demonstration of Chinese calligraphy; learn their Chinese zodiac sign; watch a silk embroidery demonstration; and see brush-painting artists at work. Children can design their own Chinese kites, make paper-folded boats, paint replicas of Peking opera masks and assemble a seven-piece Tangram puzzle.

The purpose of it all is to "bridge the different cultures," according to arts and craft coordinator Paul Yin. Many Chinese crafts, he says, have been affected by Western influences, and people can see that "East and West are not all that different."

A mélange of performances, from martial arts to Chinese dance, will run simultaneously at the Hatch Shell from 1 to 5, including an English-language poetry reading and a jazz performance by the Asian American Resource Workshop, dealing with the issues of Asian American identity; children's folkdances; and traditional Chinese duets and solos for flute, xiao (a pipe instrument similar to the flute) and violin.

"People are not aware of how much talent there is in the Chinese community," says Leslie Swartz.

"We're having different types of performing arts, traditional music and dance, to get people away from the stereotypes (of Chinese activities). It's not just straight Kung fu."

Performances will be held on the Hatch Shell stage, and arts and crafts activities will be held near the Fiedler Foodbridge. The Dragon Boat races will be held on the Charles adjacent to the Esplanade. All events are free.

The schedule:

1 p.m. — Ceremony to Open the Dragon's Eyes.
1:15-2 p.m. — The Sojourners: a jazz music ensemble.
2:20-3 p.m. — Dragon boat races on Charles River.
2:10-2:30 p.m. — The East/West Dance Theater.

2:30-2:50 p.m. — Asian American Resource Workshop: jazz and poetry.
3:30-5 p.m. — Dragon boat races on the Charles River.

3-3:15 p.m. — The East/West Dance Theater.
3:15-3:45 p.m. — Chinese Wushu Research Institute.

3:45-4 p.m. — Traditional Chinese duets and solos for flute, xiao and violin.
4:40-5 p.m. — Wah Lum Kung Fu Academy.

4:30-4:45 p.m. — Children's folk dances by the Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Assn. School Committee.
5 p.m. — Finals of the Dragon boat races on the Charles. □

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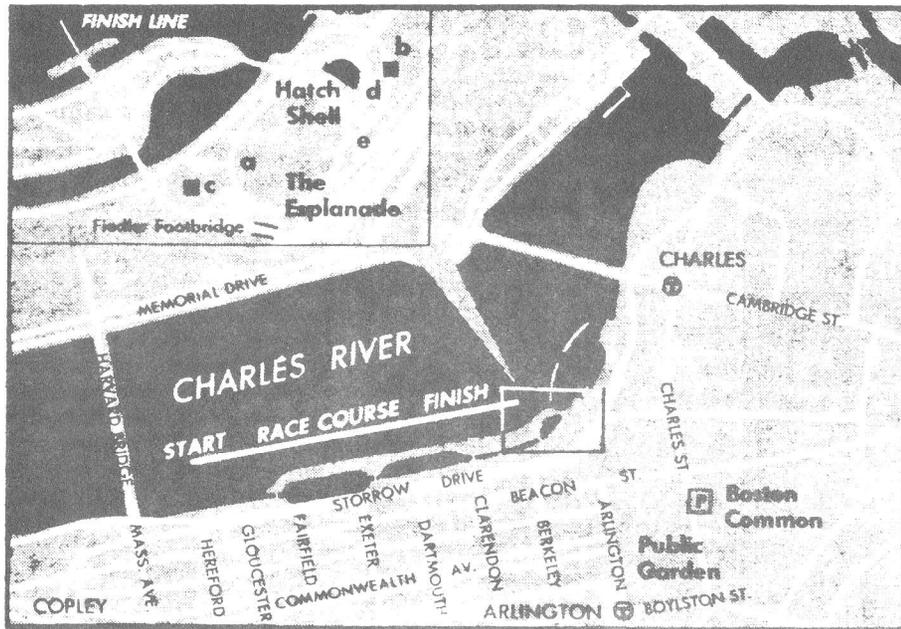
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CALENDAR



GLOBE MAP BY DEBORAH PERUGI

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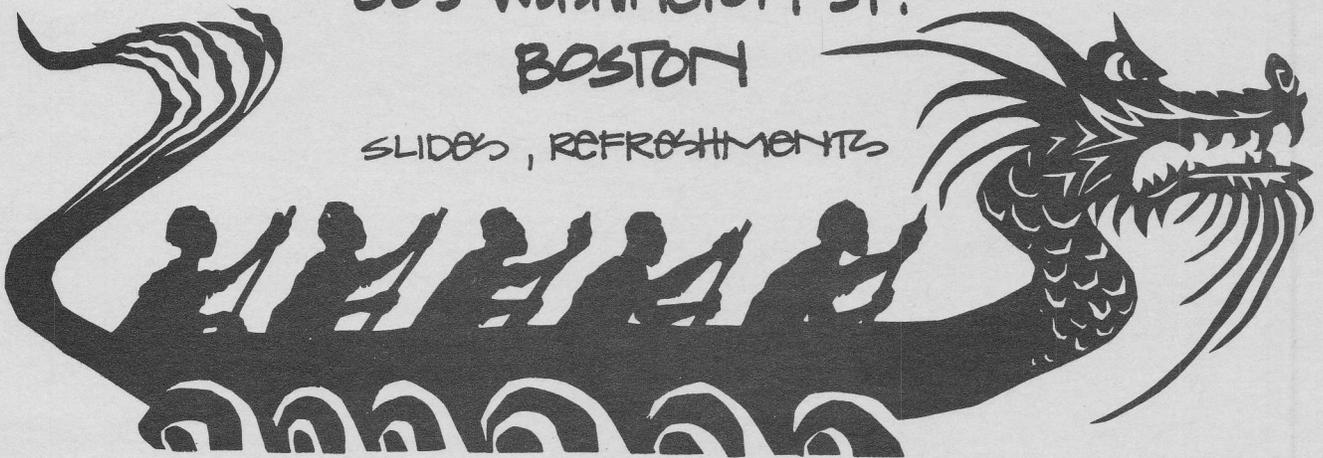
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The Dragon Boat Festival was the first time a major Chinese Festival was celebrated outside of the Chinese community in the context of a city-wide multicultural event. The lack of cooperation from the "winds and waters" was more than compensated for by community enthusiasm. We would like to thank you for your creative help, your support, your time and your energy.

Although many people participated in the Dragon Boat Festival, only three of us coordinated the events. Next year, we hope a community committee will take this over. There will be a meeting in the Fall to organize the Second Annual Dragon Boat Festival. If you work with an organization, please try to set aside funds in your budget now for next year's Festival. We certainly hope that you will participate on this committee and that you will help again next year.

Sincerely,

MARCIA IWASAKI

Nancy Sato

Leslie Swartz

Marcia Iwasaki

Nancy Sato

Leslie Swartz

Coordinators, Dragon
Boat Festival/ Chinese
Culture Week