

# [***Dragon Boat Festival In New York This Weekend Aims To Offer Asian Fun Without Politics***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:68XB-89B1-JBCM-F14D-00000-00&context=1516831)

Forbes.com

August 11, 2023 Friday

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**Length:** 1446 words

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**Highlight:** More than 1,500 paddlers from the U.S. and Canada will take to the water for 78 separate races on Aug. 12-13.

**Body**

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More than 1,500 padders will join this year's Hong Kong Dragon Boat Festival to be held at Meadow Lake in Flushing Meadows Corona Park this weekend.

Hong Kong Dragon Boat Festival in New York

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Barely a day goes by without a new sign of strain in government ties between the U.S. and China. A popular dragon boat festival now in its 31st year organized by a Hong Kong group in New York this Saturday and Sunday aims to offer spirited Asian fun and networking without the political noise.

The 2023 Hong Kong Dragon Boat Festival expects to attract 20,000 viewers a day to the shores of Meadow Lake in New York City s Queens district on Aug. 12-13, making it among the largest multicultural events this year in the U.S. city with the largest Chinese American population some 623,000 members in 2020, according to census data. Adding in New Yorkers of other Asian heritage, such as Korean, the city is home to more than 1.5 million Asian Americans that account for 17% of its population, based on Asian American Foundation data.

More than 1,500 paddlers from the U.S. and Canada organized into 180 teams will take to the water for 78 separate races this year. As many as 40% of participants aren t of Asia heritage, and about 40% are women in the historically male-dominated sport that some fans hope will one day become a Summer Olympics competition. Entry is free.

Teams from U.S. business icons such as Morgan Stanley, Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase, Con Edison and Verizon will be among the groups competing for prizes. Besides the networking and teambuilding for their own staff, sponsors and corporate participants are also in it for a longer-term payoff: support from the growing number of Asian Americans consumers who are receptive to the event s cultural messaging, according to Henry Wan, chairman of the festival s organizing committee.

And it s not only businesses in the mix. New York area groups from City Hall, the Comptroller s Office, the Public Advocates Office and the Queens Borough President s Office will be on hand. They ll also be joined this year by participants from the Chinese Consulate in New York. China is enthusiastic about promoting the dragon boat racing tradition as a soft way of connecting in the U.S., Wan said in a lakeside interview in mid-July. The minute you speak ***politics***, that's the end of conversation, he said. That awkwardness now also extends to U.S. relations with Hong Kong, whose long friendly ties with the U.S. have been hurt by changing geopolitics. Government-run Hong Kong Economic & Trade Offices in the U.S. would face closure in a draft Senate bill in July if the White House determined that Hong Kong no longer enjoyed a high degree of autonomy guaranteed under the terms of its return to China in 1997 by Great Britain. The Hong Kong government condemned the Senate move.

You can see that this has sort of become a melting pot, Wan said of the festival s mix of participants. We're trying to bring people together. That's the way to do things.

Hong Kong-born Wan has seen a lot in his decades as an immigrant success story in New York. He moved to the city in 1971 in search of a career after earning undergraduate and graduate degrees in architecture from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Today, his firm Wan Development Group works with the city government to develop and build affordable housing in New York.

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Cancer survivor Lisa H. Lee is a long-time paddler and member of the HSBC team in this year's Hong Kong Dragon Boat Festival. "Teammates become your family and support each other both in and outside the boat," she says.

HSBC

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Dragon boat racing traces its colorful history to a spirit of idealism. Poet-politician Qu Yuan, disappointed with local corruption, drowned himself in the third century B.C. in central China. According to lore, sympathetic locals boarded boats, pounded on drums and paddled noisily in the local river to spare Qu from being eaten by fish and water dragons. The races are one of China s most popular sports and celebrated with a national holiday in May or June.

When the Hong Kong Economic & Trade Office in New York started the dragon boat event in 1991, it looked to Hong Kong itself to see what cultural events attracted the interest of expat Americans in the then British colony. It's very difficult to find something that will stand out in New York City. They went back and found that the dragon boat racing attracted the most expats, recalled Wan, one of the event s first founders in New York.

Vigor, stamina, sportsmanship, team spirit, harmony are some of the characteristics associated with dragon boat racing. These are also traits shared by Hong Kongers and New Yorkers alike, said Candy Nip, director of Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in New York, by email.

The Hong Kong government hosted the festival before it converted to a 501 (c)(3) non-profit named Hong Kong Dragon Boat Festival in New York Inc. in 1995. The Hong Kong Economic & Trade Office remains a sponsor, along with HSBC, Shanghai Commercial Bank, Bank of China, Flushing Bank, New York Community Bank, Resorts World, Con Edison, Cathay Pacific, JPMorgan Chase, Maspeth Federal Savings, National Grid, Long Island Jewish Forest Hills -Northwell Health, AARP, New York Presbyterian Queens, Vita Coco and Forbes.

Beyond the cultural connections to the land of their ancestors, paddlers say they enjoy the intensity of the bonding that goes into the manning of the boats. Teams of up to 20 crewmen (18 paddlers, a drummer and a steerer) cram into a narrow boat up to 40 feet long. Muscles flex to the sound of a drumbeat that synchronizes efforts. We have drama because sometimes people in the front and back cannot see each other, Wan said. Traditionally crafted from teak, newer boats are made of less expensive plastics.

Another unifier: good body shape. I m proud to say that I m 52 years old, actively paddling and continuously winning races with my teams, said Lisa H. Lee, a U.S. Integrity Regulatory Reporting Lead at HSBC in New York. I was not always athletic. I am a cancer survivor. Following my recovery, I joined the dragon boat team in my late 30s. The sport has helped me stay healthy; it s a low impact and total body workout, Lee said by email. Having become passionate about racing, she personally owns three paddles. HSBC has been a sponsor of the New York races since their founding.

The festival s three main missions are unchanged from less politically charged times 31 years ago, Wan said: To build friendship between people in Hong Kong and New York, promote knowledge of Chinese culture, and advance multiculturalism. Event networking also helps businesses keep Asian American staff, he said. We can actually see more and more big corporations have an Asian employee network. And most teams are organized through them because companies encourage them to get involved. It s a way to retain talent from the Asian American talent pool, Wan said.

To boost participation, the festival lets boats have as few as 10 crew members instead of the traditional 20. Increasing the number of dragon boat paddlers worldwide will help get the Asia-born sport into Summer Olympics competition, Wan said. To get 10 people is almost a like a baseball team a lot easier to get, he noted. Gender and industry grouped races such as the Women s Invitational, Seniors Invitational and Media Invitational encourage sign-ups and rivalries.

Teams in the New York races often regroup afterward in the nearby downtown Flushing section of Queens, famous for its large Chinese immigrant population and Asian food to celebrate. Foodies and music fans that join the weekend event can enjoy snacks such as pork buns from food tents and tunes in a variety of global styles.

Given today s U.S.-China political controversies, the switch to a non-profit back in 1995 by the festival organizer proved to be far-sighted. The Hong Kong government backed the change to a locally run non-profit because it realized that if you organize it by a government, a lot of people would think of it as a propaganda, Wan said. By contrast, a non-profit run by locals would have more room to grow as a cultural event.

We have been very successful, Wan said, pointing to past turnout and anticipating another good weekend on Aug. 12-13. The races go on rain or shine. (Clickherefor more information.)

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The 2023 Hong Kong Dragon Boat Festival in New York will be held Sat, Aug. 12 and Sun, Aug. 13 at Meadow Lake, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, in Queens.

Russell Flannery

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**Load-Date:** August 12, 2023

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