The Chinese Dragon Boat Festival occurs on the 5th day of the 5th month of the Chinese lunisolar calendar and lasts for three days. This festival is also known as the Tuen Ng Festival, the Duanwu Festival, the Zhongxia Festival, and the Double Fifth Festival. This holiday has been observed nationally for over 2,000 years. There are three different stories of whom this festival commemorates: Qu Yuan, Wu Zixu, and Cao E.

The most well known story is about Qu Yuan, an ancient Chinese patriotic poet who was alive from 340-278 BCE. Qu Yuan was a minister in the state of Chu who wrote many poems to show his love and devotion for his country. He drowned himself in the river after he was exiled by the king because he didn’t want to see his country be invaded and conquered by the state of Qin. It is said that local people raced out in their boats to retrieve his body. When they couldn’t find his body, they dropped balls of sticky rice (zongzi) into the river so the fish would eat them and not Qu Yuan’s body. This was said to be the creation of zongzi, sticky rice dumplings or “Chinese tamales”. He died on the 5th day of the 5th month, thus the people created this festival to honor his death.

The southeast region of Jiangsu (former territory of the state of Wu) commemorates Wu Zixu who was a Premier, a politician. Zixu warned his king, King Fuchai, of a dangerous plot regarding a beautiful woman, Xishi, who was sent by king Goujian of the state of Yue. King Fuchai became angry and forced Zixu to commit suicide in the river, his body was discovered on the 5th day of the 5th month in the river in 484 BCE.

The northeastern region of Zhejiang celebrates a young girl, Cao E, who was alive from 130-143 AD. In 143, during the Duanwu Festival Cao E’s father, Cao Xu, accidentally fell into the Shun River. Cao E jumped into try to search for him and was gone for three days. After five days, both of their bodies were found, they had drowned in the river. Eight years later, a temple was constructed in her memory to honor the sacrifice she made for her father. The Shun River was renamed to the Cao’e River.

The most popular activity during this festival is to race dragon boats. The wooden boats are shaped and decorated to resemble a Chinese dragon. The boat sizes vary by region, but are generally 65-115 feet long and need between 30-60 people to paddle it. During the races, the teams paddle harmoniously, accompanied by the sound of a beating drum. It is said that the winning team will have good luck and a happy life for the upcoming year.

Zongzi is eaten throughout the Dragon Boat Festival. Zongzi is basically a Chinese version of a tamale. It’s sticky rice wrapped inside a bamboo or reed leaf that contains a sweet or savory filling. The northern style tends to be more sweet and dessert-like, while the southern style is more savory or salty. The southern zongzi filling can include salted duck egg, pork belly, taro, shredded chicken or pork, Chinese sausage, and mushrooms.

Realgar wine is the typical drink of the festival. It’s a Chinese alcoholic drink that contains Chinese cereal wine with powdered realgar, a yellow-orange arsenic sulfide mineral. They drink this wine to help protect themselves from diseases, snakes, and evil spirits. Realgar is known as an antidote against poison. When the ancient people went searching for Qu Yuan’s body in the river, a doctor poured realgar into the river to draw out an aquatic dragon so they could kill it.

For decoration, people hang up icons of Zhong Kui (a mystic guardian figure), mugwort (aromatic plants), and calamus (palms) to ward off evil spirits. Other activities include taking long walks, wearing perfumed pouches to protect themselves from diseases, participating in an egg standing game (try to make an egg stand up exactly when the clock strikes noon) for good luck, and writing spells.

Below is a picture of zongzi, as well as two recipes! Please continue on the tradition by making “Chinese tamales” or by purchasing some from the Center to celebrate the holiday! You can place your order of zongzi and pick them up on Thursday, May 25th at the Tucson Chinese Cultural Center.

Written by Brooke Lee Harris
Zongzi with Pork and Chestnut Filling

Ingredients

- 5 cups glutinous rice
- 1/2 pound dried mung beans
- 20 dried chestnuts
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon Chinese five spice powder
- 10 dried black mushrooms, soaked with stems removed and caps sliced
- 20 bamboo leaves
- 1/2 pound pork belly, sliced

Steps

1. Add glutinous rice, mung beans and chestnuts to separate bowls.
2. Add enough warm water to cover the ingredients in the bowls. Soak overnight.
3. Drain the rice, mung beans and chestnuts before combining them in a large bowl. Do this after the ingredients have soaked overnight.
4. Add the salt and five-spice and stir to coat.
5. Soften mushrooms by pouring warm water over them. Cover and let stand approximately 20 minutes. Drain.
6. Discard the mushroom stems and thinly slice the mushroom caps.
7. Add bamboo leaves to a large pot.
8. Pour in enough water to cover. Bring the water to a boil and let the leaves cool.
9. Pat bamboo leaves dry before using to make the “tamales”.
10. Place 2 bamboo leaves, slightly overlapping, on a clean work surface.
11. Add about 1/3 cup of the rice mixture in the center.
12. Top each mound of rice with a slice of pork and 3 to 4 slices of mushrooms.
13. Cover with about 2 tablespoons of rice and the mung bean mixture.
14. Fold the leaves over the “tamale” filling to enclose the filling completely.
15. Use kitchen twine or string to secure the “tamale”.
16. Place tamales in a large pot, pour in enough water to cover them, and bring to a boil.
17. Lower the heat and cook until the tamales are tender, about 4 to 5 hours. Add more water, as needed, to keep the “tamales” covered with simmering water. Cook until the tamale filling feels tender when you squeeze it gently, four to five hours.
18. Drain the water from the “tamales” and serve warm.
Sweet Zongzi

Ingredients

- 50 sheets of bamboo or reed leaves
- Glutinous rice (1 kilogram), about 2.2 pounds
- Chinese dates (250 grams), heaping 1/2 pound (conversion was done using Medjool dates)

Steps

1. Cover both rice and dates with water. Cover the bowl and let mixture soak for 12 hours or until thoroughly soaked.
2. Wash the leaves.
3. Lay out leaves on a cutting or chopping board.
4. Fold the leaves flat at the leafstalk to make a sheet.
5. Hold the sheet, fold it round in the middle and make a funnel till both ends are laid over each other in one direction.
6. Add about 1/10 of a kilogram of rice and about 6 dates. Be sure to cover the dates with the rice.
7. Fold the leaves up to seal the open side of the funnel and tie the bundle with a band made of twisted leaves.
8. Put the tamales in a pot with water to cover. Make sure the tamales remain covered and pressed together during boiling.
9. Boil tamales for about 2 hours or cook in a pressure cooker for about 40 minutes.