

## What We Commemorate When We Commemorate Qu Yuan

Qu Yuan (c. 340-278 BCE), a counselor in the court of the State of Chu, championed “fair governance,” advocating legal and institutional reforms and alliance with the State of Qi to resist the growing power of the State of Qin. He was consequently ostracized by the aristocracy and exiled to the far reaches of the Yuan and Xiang Rivers in present-day Hunan Province. With the resolve of a warrior, however, he remained unwavering in pursuing his ideals and lived by the doctrine of a gentleman. Never did he allow any worldly foulness to defile his noble purity, or any shred of laxity or resignation to weaken his determination.

Qu Yuan expressed his moral standards by virtue of his names, as seen in the opening of his *Li sao* (“Encountering Sorrow”): “My father named me Zhengze and styled me Lingjun.” “Zhengze” means integrity, uprightness, and adherence to principles of being a man, while “Lingjun” means intelligence, wisdom, fairness, and justice. In his *Ju song* (“Ode to the Tangerine Tree”), he used the “solitary and steadfast” tangerine tree to symbolize his noble character, vowing never to compromise his ideals even in the face of death. He seemed to observe all the chaos of Chu from high above with clarity, yet felt powerless to change anything.

Qu Yuan’s everlasting legacy lies in his deep concern for the people as demonstrated by his literary works and political aspirations, and his greatness in his persistent compassion for, and commitment to, his country and his people.

The popularity of stories about Qu Yuan and his works in people’s lives, and their central role in the Dragon Boat Festival commemorations, are attributed to his words and deeds imbued with boundless love for his country, people, and native culture; such love contains a resilience sustaining Chinese culture and spirit. Though he lamented, “My countrymen understand me not; why should I still yearn for the old capital?” and considered, “Why not simply leave?” he eventually decided to stay because of his commitment to the spirit and culture of his homeland.

Now the annual Dragon Boat Festival features themed commemorations throughout China, including storytelling about Qu Yuan and the festival, recitals of his poetry, and dragon boat races. These events celebrate his integrity, righteousness, and love for his country and his people, while encouraging the public to better understand traditional culture and help foster a deep sense of national pride and identity.

When commemorating Qu Yuan today, we commemorate the spirit of Tianwen (“Asking Heaven”) he epitomizes, a spirit shared by traditional Chinese scholars undaunted by death in their bold exploration of the unknown. In his long poem of the same name, Qu Yuan posed questions about topics ranging from natural phenomena such as the division between heaven and earth, the interplay of yin and yang, and celestial bodies, to myths, legends, and historical accounts of sages, villains, and the rise and fall of dynasties. Through these inquiries, he expressed his views on the cosmos, history and politics. Awe-inspiring is his explorative spirit—he valued facts over mere books, and dared to question and criticize.

China’s series of planetary exploration missions is also named Tianwen, which embodies the Chinese people’s critical attitude toward conventional beliefs and their pursuit of scientific truth. Without the former, there would hardly be any possibility of the latter. Today, Qu Yuan’s *Tian wen* encourages the questioning of established misconceptions and rigid views of history; furthermore, it inspires intellectual breakthroughs and scientific innovation through constant criticism and relentless quest.

A spiritual symbol, Qu Yuan has always played, and will continue to play an extraordinary role in building a sense of community among the Chinese people. Without such a great sage, the entire Chinese scholarly community would be deprived of part of its spiritual underpinning, and Chinese history some of its heroic albeit tragic resonance.

The spirit of Qu Yuan will endure as will Chinese civilization. Our complete confidence in traditional Chinese culture finds expression in this: upholding principles without being conservative, and valuing heritage without being retrogressive.