

## **The Language of Dragon Boating in Hong Kong and Singapore\***

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### ABSTRACT

This research draws on elements of systemic functional linguistics to conduct a discourse analysis of dragon-boating in Asia, predominantly in the commercial areas of Hong Kong and Singapore, where this sport has both a long history and strong culture today. It seeks to understand how experiential and interpersonal meanings are related to this sport in a variety of online texts ranging from local news media sites, corporation team websites, sites from dragon boat companies specialising in training corporations, dragon boat paddlers' websites and other popular sources such as 'expatliving'. Findings demonstrate that dragon boating has certain unique characteristics which help to give it significance in this region. With the Duanwu Festival held annually, the sport is steeped firmly in mythology and legend. Additionally, the nature of the boat as a synchronised machine is exploited by corporations and linked to competitive performance. As an intense sport, physical and mental attributes such as 'strength' and 'tenacity' are associated with it; the upper body requirements of the practice also gives it a unique trait for breast cancer survivors. 'Tragedy' is also a part of dragon boat's modern history with a fatal accident for the Singapore men's team during an international race in Cambodia. In sum, the sport of dragon boating can be seen to have a rich schema of semiotic associations in Hong Kong and Singapore.

**Keywords:** systemic functional linguistics, discourse analysis, dragon-boating, Hong Kong and Singapore.

## 1. Introduction

The aim of the research is to explore the contexts in which dragon boating is presented and discussed in multiple texts in Hong Kong and Singapore to understand the cultural practices related to the sport. Using McGannon's (2016) words, the research seeks to provide a 'socially constructed, nuanced analysis of culture, identity and experience' (233) related to dragon boat in these cities. In this research, the objective is to provide an analysis which uncovers the discursive construction of dragon boating from a variety of texts from Hong Kong and Singapore; and thus, to better understand its nature in these contexts. To develop this understanding, the experiential meanings related to the sport are presented. As Halliday (1999) points out, humans 'make sense of the complex world, to classify, or group into categories, the objects and events' (355). Experiential meanings represent the active role of grammar in construing reality. Additionally, Appraisal (Martin & White, 2005; and Martin & Rose, 2007) from systemic functional linguistics and specifically the systems of meaning of AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION belonging to ATTITUDE are employed. From initial analyses of multiple texts, these systems emerged to be the most relevant elements of the Appraisal framework for explaining the patterns of interpersonal meanings.

A variety of texts were collected to form a corpus of over 100 000 words. Local media sites such as *The Straits Times*<sup>1</sup>, *The South China Morning Post*<sup>1</sup> and *Channel News Asia*<sup>1</sup> are explored; the discourse of company websites and their social media sites also. For example, two corporations heavily involved in dragon boat racing are *DBS*<sup>2</sup> and *HSBC*<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, there are companies who specialise in providing dragon boat events and training for these corporations such as *SAVA*<sup>3</sup> and *Dragon-Boat Innovate*<sup>3</sup>. In addition, many dragon boat clubs have their own websites or social media sites. Finally, the national archives of the Hong Kong and Singapore sports councils were investigated from 1981 to the present for reports on dragon boating events. Exploring the experiential and interpersonal meanings related to this sport through the language in these texts enables us to understand its nature in this context. It is, to this author's knowledge, research that has yet to be conducted in the field of the language of sports.

The paper begins by providing background knowledge about the commonly held beliefs of the historical origins of dragon boating. After that, the literature reviewed concerns how sport has been linked to cultural heritage and the workplace, which sets the backdrop for the section on dragon boating as a corporate sport. The paper then moves on to describe the methods for data collection as well as the data analysis approaches drawing on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978, 1999; Martin & White, 2005; Martin & Rose, 2007). The findings then follow. Language observed from the data relates to several themes. One selective code is 'dragon boating as an Asian sport'. Axial codes under this section are 'tradition and identity building' and in-vivo code 'keeping dragon boat afloat'. Another selective code is 'corporate discourse'. Axial codes relating to this are 'synergy and putting team before self'; 'tenacity, spirit of excellence and competition'; as well as 'corporate responsibility and environmentalism'. 'Individual mental and physical health benefits' is the third selective code. This is separated into three axial codes: 'physical fitness, discipline and mental toughness'; 'being close to nature'; and

‘cancer survivors’. The final selective code is ‘tragedy’, as this is strongly in the public memory of Singapore’s national team’s dragon boating history.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Sport and Asian culture**

There has been some research on Asian sports such as Kung Fu or Wushu as a part of Asian culture (Gang, 2001; Wang, 2012). Wushu has a unique oriental underpinning as the Chinese language and complex imagery from nature is used to describe its techniques. Thus, Yang (2008) reports that despite English being the lingua franca in many Wu Shu classes, coaches still find it key to keep the Chinese terminology. These are seen as essential for teaching the sport’s essence. Other sports are also linked specifically to an Asian identity such as Speak Takraw and Chinlone. This latter is the national Burmese sport, and is deeply embedded in the Burmese Buddhist religion. Dragon boating can also be seen to be deeply embedded in Asian culture and have highly symbolic meanings.

Before looking at dragon boat’s contemporary experiential and interpersonal meanings, an overview of its history and its mythical origins demonstrates the depth of this culture in Asian societies such as Hong Kong and Singapore. Dragon Boating dates as far back as ancient Olympia in Asia. In fact, it is much more than a sport. Each year, a dragon boat festival known as the Duanwu Festival is held in Asian countries such as China, Malaysia, and Taiwan as well as Singapore and Hong Kong. The festival is a public holiday in these Asian societies and is steeped firmly in mythology and legend. The historical narrative evokes how the death of Qu Yuan (屈原, 340–278 BC), an official of the Chu State during the Warring States period, and a respected poet, occurred. The story holds that Qu Yuan was outspoken against the King’s idea to join forces with the state of Qin and for that was banished for treason. Over the next twenty years of his banishment, he wrote poetry extensively and in much of it lauded the Chu State. When Qin invaded and took control of Chu, he was heartbroken, and committed suicide in the Miluo River (a branch of the Yangtze) in 278 BC. When the locals heard of this, they rushed to the river and threw cooked rice balls into the water to prevent the fish from eating his body.

The process of throwing cooked food into the river became commonplace and the same activities are conducted every year as memorial to Qu Yuan’s life. Since then, the use of these boats to save Qu Yuan’s body has developed into dragon boating and the rice balls, referred to as *fongzi*, are now much more complex, mixed among other ingredients with pork, peanuts and salted eggs in glutinous rice and wrapped with bamboo leaves in a pyramid shape. Additionally, participants of the festival carry a *fragrant bag* of blue, green, red and yellow silk, fine satin or cotton. It is embroidered with animals, flowers and fruits and Chinese herbal medicines can be found inside. This bag is believed to ward off evil spirits and welcome in fortune and happiness for the year. The historical and cultural backdrop helps to explain why dragon boating might be used as a social identifier in Hong Kong and Singapore as it enables these citizens to draw on their Chinese history and culture.

## 2.2. Sport and the workplace

Another element of dragon boating in Hong Kong and Singapore is its link to the workplace and in particular corporate culture. These cities have a significant amount of dragon boat events that attract competitive national and international corporations. Before exploring this field, a brief overview of how sport has become viewed as part of the workplace culture is provided as a backdrop to this element of corporate culture today. In the 1970s, the term 'culture' began appearing as a corporate theme. Organizational value-systems were seen to be increasingly important if the corporation were to be effective. Deal & Kennedy (1982) point out that:

Companies that have cultivated their individual identities by shaping values, making heroes, spelling out rites and rituals, and acknowledging the cultural network have an edge. These corporations have values and beliefs to pass along — not just products. They have stories to tell — not just profits to make. They have heroes whom managers and workers can emulate — not just faceless bureaucrats. In short, they are human institutions that provide practical meaning for people, both on and off the job (Deal & Kennedy, 1982: 15).

The development of a strong identity developed as a necessary element of a positive corporate culture. Additionally, the persona of the successful employee who can be emulated, became accentuated as part of corporate culture. This developed into reasoning why sport can also be linked to corporate culture. Indeed, as the sport-corporate culture nexus has developed, it has become popular to posit that soft skills learned from sport can transfer to the workplace.

In their book *Applied Sport Management Skills*, Lussier & Kimball (2019) link organisational culture with team sport culture. They state that the ideal in both is to develop bonds to build a solid group identity. This identity can be built, according to Hal Leavitt, professor of organizational behaviour at Stanford University's Business School, by having 'your own team competing against others'. He points out how corporate executives may also utilize sport to overcome the entrenched hierarchy within corporations, and to reinforce the company culture. Arnold (1994) also contends that sport's positive value systems empower participants and are beneficial to employees. Roessler & Bredahl (2006) similarly portray how a company in West Zealand, Denmark, whose eighteen employees report how they were able to network with their colleagues and develop strong bonds eroding any divisions that might be present through their weekly swims and gymnastics sessions. Manufacturing, administration and strategic development sections socialised together building a team culture. This is concurred by Smith and Westerbeek (2007) who view sport in the workplace as a social influencer with its unique social responsibilities to engage participants and spectators. These factors are perhaps partially why corporate sporting activities are present on a global scale today with branding events such as the Standard Chartered Marathon occurring annually in Hong Kong and Singapore as well as in other business hubs around the world.

### 2.3. Corporate culture of dragon-boating in Hong Kong and Singapore

Brooke (2015) has researched dragon boating's prevalence in Hong Kong and Singapore. It appears that its links to the corporate section seems to be one of the reasons why it is so popular in this region. A good example of the growth of the sport in Singapore is represented through its main events calendar. In 1987, the Singapore Dragon Boat Association (SDBA) comprised only eighteen affiliates from both private and public institutions; it now boasts over one-hundred-and-thirty-five. There are at least two major competitions held in Singapore and Hong Kong every year. In Singapore, these are the Singapore World Invitational Dragon Boat Races and the Singapore River Regatta. In Hong Kong, these are The Hong Kong Dragon Boat Festival and the Hong Kong Dragon Boat Carnival. In 2018, at the Singapore River Regatta, two-thousand-and-fifteen dragon boat athletes in fifty-five participating teams competed in two all-day events on the 7th and 8th July 2018, with around half of these as corporate teams. Events like the Regatta provide a platform for fierce competition at the corporate level with races for women, men, and mixed gender teams. Some of the corporate teams are DBS Asia Dragons; Deloitte & Touche LLP; ExxonMobil; Hewlett Packard Asia Pacific; Hewlett Packard Singapore; HSBC Sports and Social Club; Keppel Dragons; Marina Bay Sands Dragons; POSB Dragons; Standard Chartered Bank; and Team OCBC Dragons. In addition to corporate crews, there are a number of companies who help to manage these events. Dragon Boat Innovate (DBI) and SAVA are good examples. SAVA's logo is 'think dragon-boat think-SAVA'. These companies exist solely as corporate dragon boat event organisers in Singapore. Their missions are to focus on training participants for racing or facilitating corporate teambuilding. The companies also hire out their fleets of dragon boats; and provide coaching expertise to teams on demand.

Confucianism, with its focus on ethical values, is said to be part of the way of life in cities such as Hong Kong and Singapore, profoundly influencing these societies at individual, community and national levels (Kuah, 1990; Chen & Chung, 1994). Consequently, Confucianism is present in corporate culture also (Kuah, 1990). It signifies a strong value of institutions, if they help to maintain social solidarity and enable people to live in harmony and prosperity. For Confucianism to function, a strong loyalty to hierarchy is required (Chen & Chung, 1994) represented in the value of *xiao* or filial piety (Kuah, 1990). The self should be viewed as subordinate to the collective good as a form of disciplined subordination. The collective may be the corporation, or the local, or national community. Also stemming from Confucianism is a focus on modelling what is 'good and successful' (Kuah, 1990). The *junzi* refers to exemplary persons. Citizens should seek to reproduce *junzi* behaviour in daily life. The *junzi* may refer to exceptional employees in the workplace (Chen & Chung, 1994). It can also refer to athletes involved in corporate sport activities. This link to Confucianism might also be a reason for the strength of the dragon boating culture in Hong Kong and Singapore as both *xiao* and *junzi* are valued.

### 3. Method

The aim of the research is to explore the contexts in which dragon boating is presented and discussed in multiple texts in Hong Kong and Singapore so as to understand the cultural practices related to the sport. Using McGannon's (2016) definition of critical discourse analysis, the research seeks to provide a 'socially constructed, nuanced analysis of culture, identity and experience' (McGannon, 2016: 233) related to dragon boat in these cities. The objective is therefore to uncover the discursive construction of dragon boating and to understand its nature in these contexts, not to enact social change as a function of critical discourse analysis, as noted in Fairclough's (2013) Critical Discourse Analysis overview. Through a process of textual analyses of multiple texts, hypotheses about how to present the findings from this research were formed and refined via a to-and-fro process of inductive and deductive reasoning (Walliman, 2005). It was found that a thematic presentation depicting the experiential meanings (Halliday, 1978, 1999), or content areas where the sport is discussed in the discourse, was most effective. Additionally, Appraisal (as set out by Martin & White, 2005; and Martin & Rose, 2007) from systemic functional linguistics, and specifically the systems of AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION as parts of ATTITUDE, were surmised sound frameworks to help to present the interpersonal meanings given to the sport and its socio-political and cultural practices. Using these approaches combined to analyse news media sites, national archives, and websites of corporations and non-corporation teams involved in dragon boating from Singapore and Hong Kong, it is possible to capture how dragon boating is depicted and valued.

#### 3.1. Data collection

Purposive sampling was employed to find suitable texts for the analyses. The texts were taken from online versions of the news media sites of *The Straits Times*<sup>1</sup>, *The South China Morning Post*<sup>1</sup> and *Channel News Asia*<sup>1</sup>. The criterion for selection was that the main heading of the news article should contain the term 'dragon boat'. In this way, the search criteria could be specific but also neutral in connotation, providing some objectivity. Thirty news media reports were examined using this method. Additionally, ten commentaries containing the term 'dragon boat' from the national archive of the Singapore Sports Council from 1981 to the present day were analysed. These describe dragon boating events in the region. Further, texts devoted to dragon boating from corporations such as *DBS*<sup>2</sup> and *HSBC*<sup>2</sup> were examined. Also, websites containing written texts and interviews from two companies specialising in dragon boat training for corporations were analysed. These companies are called *SAVA*<sup>3</sup> and *Dragon-Boat Innovate*<sup>3</sup>. Five dragon boat paddle club social media sites were also examined. Finally, articles referencing dragon boat on well-known social media site 'expatliving' for Singapore (<https://expatliving.sg/>) and Hong Kong (<https://expatliving.hk/>) were also studied. In all, these sources provided a corpus of over 100 000 words.

### 3.2. Data analysis

McGannon (2016: 233) explains the main tenet of critical discourse analysis is to capture a ‘socially constructed, nuanced analysis of culture, identity and experience’. This approach differs to Fairclough’s (2013: 19) notion of critical discourse analysis based on a ‘social wrong’, which gives ‘relative centrality given to social change’. In this research, discourse analysis is used, not to enact social change, but to uncover the discursive construction, and therefore the underlying nature, of dragon boating in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Michael Halliday, is a theory of language that provides effective tools to conduct discourse analysis because it also posits that language is a meaning-making resource which can only be understood in its situational contexts (Halliday, 1978). For this paper, the experiential meanings are drawn from content related to dragon boating as a sport such as historical associations and corporate as well as physical culture today. Experiential meanings are predominantly provided through lexical taxonomies and verbal processes for the instrumental reason of being able to represent and explore our experiences of the world (Halliday, 1978, 1999). In terms of the interpersonal meanings related to the sport, the system of Appraisal is drawn on. Martin and Rose (2007: 22) define Appraisal as a system about ‘the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings involved and the ways in which values are sourced and readers aligned’. ATTITUDE, a sub-group of Appraisal, has to do with evaluating things, people's character and their feelings (Martin & White, 2005) and is divided into AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION. ATTITUDE is used for the analysis of the discourse in this study. AFFECT refers to the expression of negative or positive feelings. These feelings are further divided into 14 sub-categories: *happiness/cheer; happiness/affection; unhappiness/misery; unhappiness/antipathy; security/confidence; security/trust; insecurity/disquiet; insecurity/surprise; satisfaction/interest; satisfaction/admiration; dissatisfaction/ennui; dissatisfaction/displeasure; affect/fear; affect/desire*. ATTITUDE also comprises JUDGEMENT (evaluation of human behaviour), which can be distinguished between personal judgements of admiration or criticism and moral judgements of praise or condemnation (Martin & Rose, 2007). Finally, APPRECIATION is used to assess entities, things, and processes. It comprises three main subsystems: *reaction, composition, and social valuation* (Martin & White, 2005). This paper focuses specifically on *social valuation*. As Lee (2014) points out, *social valuation* analyses a writer’s non-aesthetic assessment of a text or process. For example, whether it is viewed as crucial and of social significance or not. Thus, valuations are strongly influenced by their social environment.

Conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), similar to a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), was conducted to construct the findings section. The process involves shifts from inductive to deductive reasoning. Initially, an immersion in the data to understand meanings related to dragon boating took place. Then, data were re-read in closer detail to derive thematic codes from specific areas of the dragon boating discourse; for example, as a historical or corporate sport. After that, exact words and phrases from texts collected were highlighted to capture key concepts and attitudes related to dragon boating. Thus,

with these initial analyses, the content areas (experiential meanings) as well as the subjectivity (interpersonal meanings) related to dragon boating were examined. The meanings derived at this stage from these observations of interpersonal language led to the decision to use a coding scheme drawing on ATTITUDE, JUDGEMENT and *social valuation* from APPRECIATION. Then, codes were sorted into meaningful clusters (axial codes) based on how they related. These axial codes were then further organised into categories or selective codes. In sections 4.1. to 4.4. selective codes can be found, while axial codes are found and represented in sections 4.1.1. to 4.3.3.

A seasoned independent qualitative researcher, and one versed in systemic functional linguistics, was provided with ten example excerpts of text collected randomly from the analysed corpus. The analyst was asked to code these texts by first interpreting their subject matter or experiential meanings to thematically label them. Then, the analyst was asked to describe these excerpts for their interpersonal meanings, or subjectivity, as a part of ATTITUDE, JUDGEMENT and *social valuation* from APPRECIATION. High agreement (80%) was reached with the primary researcher from these trials. Sixteen out of twenty meaning units were coded in consistent ways suggesting that these are accurate representations. Discrepancies were overcome through discussion. For example, rather than the axial code of ‘dragon boat enduring’, the independent researcher provided an in-vivo code (one directly citing a text) ‘keeping dragon boat afloat’. Other minor refinements were required to discuss inferences such as the one made in the axial code *tradition & identity building* in which the primary researcher observed a moral JUDGEMENT (*praise*) for the North Koreans rather than solely a feeling of building *trust* (AFFECT) with this nation’s citizens through the sport. The independent analyst had not made this observation but through discussion, agreement was found. Other discussions of this ilk occurred.

#### 4. Findings

Dragon boating is consistently linked to positive AFFECT (Martin & White, 2005; Martin & Rose, 2007) and is given great historical, cultural and social value in the corpus collected. Cultural and historical identity are important elements of the discursive construction with language commonly relating the sport to the Duanwu Festival, and its historical significance for these Asian cities. Selective codes in the findings constructed from the media texts relating to cultural and historical meanings are *tradition* and *identity building*. Dragon boating is also strongly linked to corporate culture in Hong Kong and Singapore. Salience is given to competitive strength, team building and social engineering in the corporate discourse. Selective codes constructed to relate these corporate meanings given to dragon boat are *synergy and putting team before self; tenacity, spirit of excellence and competition; as well as corporate responsibility and environmentalism*. Additionally, themes at a more individual level were observed to be common in the corpus. The selective code for this section is *individual mental and physical benefits*. Axial codes for this selective code are *discipline and mental toughness; being close to nature; and women cancer survivors*. Finally, a selective code *tragedy* emerges from the corpus as it appears consistently in the media. In 2007, Singapore’s national dragon boat team suffered a tragic accident during a competition in Cambodia. This proved fatal for five of its twenty-two-man crew.

#### 4.1. Dragon boating as an Asian Sport

##### 4.1.1. Tradition & identity building

Positive AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION permeate this selective code. The sport is consistently associated with historical and cultural *interest* (AFFECT) in the news media as well as the websites of corporations that specialize in setting up and running dragon boat events, such as SAVA and Dragon Boat Innovate (DBI). It is viewed as a unique platform because of these links. The sources explored refer to the ‘traditional pageantry’ of the events as well as ‘centuries-old-races’; and ‘rowing rituals’. Examples of footage portray different teams’ preparations and also present interviews with team members from various countries in Asia-Pacific. Part of the commentaries are also commonly linked to the special food eaten as well as other Asian cultural phenomena such as Chinese Opera, and Lion Dance. In the news media, JUDGEMENT (*esteem/admire*) is also very much present in the references to the behaviour of individuals at the festivals as they ‘re-enact the legend’ of Qu Yuan and ‘immortalise’ his death. Thus, participants in the dragon boating competitions are admired for their behaviour. *Social valuation* from APPRECIATION is also strong in these references because the sport is given great social significance as an entity. This is evident in several media articles such as this from The South China Morning Post, in which the journalist states: ‘Reverellers and rowers gathered at waterways across Hong Kong’. This demonstrates the widespread significance of the dragon boat festival as an island-wide activity. Additionally, these sporting traditions are commonly associated with *happiness/cheer* (AFFECT). In the article ‘Soaked in Fun’ in Singapore’s *Straits Times* about a Hong Kong dragon boat festival<sup>1</sup>, the participants of a dragon boating event engage in a water fight to mimic rainfall to evoke the dragon gods. Similarly, in a *South China Morning Post* article<sup>4</sup>, participants of a dragon boat festival are reported to ‘Soak in the Fun and Festivities’ as they celebrate these rituals dating back to ancient times.

Dragon boating is also given *social valuation* (APPRECIATION) as a cultural identity signifier for Asians living outside the Asia region. It is valued because it is viewed as a way to further relations with other nations. For example, a media report in Singapore’s *The Straits Times* presents how Chinese citizens living in Uganda hosted a dragon boat event. The event was led by the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and the China Africa Friendship Association of Uganda on the shores of Lake Victoria in Entebbe city, 40km South of the capital Kampala. The journalist writes how ‘The dragon boat festival not only serves as a competition and gathering, but also deepens the relationship between the two peoples and the two cultures’.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in this report there is an inference of how dragon boating is part of developing *security/trust* (AFFECT) between nations, which also gives it *social valuation* (APPRECIATION) as a tool for international relations.

In the same way, another article presents how dragon boating enabled the North Koreans to be initiated into Asian culture. A participant in that study states:

‘The North Koreans hardly knew what dragon boating, a traditional form of canoeing, was until the team came together’.<sup>6</sup> Thus, not only was *social valuation* (APPRECIATION) as a cultural identifier present but it was also viewed as a detente builder between the North and South Koreans. This associates the sport with *security/trust* (AFFECT) also. In an interview in the article, a South Korean canoeist Eun Jeong-byun talks about being in the same boat and competing as a unified Korea: ‘I was deeply emotional... We’re divided and forbidden from seeing each other, but we both know the same song and speak the same language’. Therefore, dragon boating has a symbolic meaning as an acculturation mechanism for North Koreans as well as a unifying force for Asians; in this case, the Koreans. There is also here an inference of a moral JUDGEMENT (*praise*) for the North Koreans’ behaviour. Although they may be isolated and citizens of an unwanted social regime, they still remain Asian and are able and enthusiastic to appreciate their Asian identity through the practice of dragon boating. Thus, more praise seems to be given to their behaviour.

*Social valuation* (APPRECIATION) is also a part of dragon boating in terms of its community building at the national level in Singapore. In an interview at the Singapore National Premier Open final of the Singapore Dragon Boat Festival held at the Marina Channel on July 16, 2017, the Singapore Dragon Boating Association’s (SDBA) president Chia Shi-Lu<sup>7</sup> states that the SDBA’s work spans across ‘three decades of community building through dragon boating’. He then remarks: ‘We hope that the sport will continue to attract more fans as we work closely ... to bring people from all walks of life together to build stronger community ties.’ As cities like Singapore and Hong Kong are both international hubs for business, there tends to be a mix of racial groups in the corporate sector. Many corporations have their own dragon boating teams; other international teams are from universities. In addition, there are some teams belonging to local community sports clubs. Dragon boating is viewed as a significant institutional unifier (*social valuation*/ APPRECIATION) for these different groups. There also appears to be moral JUDGEMENT (*praise*) of these dragon boating participants’ engagement in the activity as part of their duty to build relations with significant others.

Additionally, there are references to the dragon boat being a location where social status, gender and bodily shape become insignificant, inferring JUDGEMENT (*praise*). In a Dragon Boat Innovate (DBI) video,<sup>8</sup> the boat is said to bring staff within a company ‘from CEO to janitor together to achieve a common goal’ and each has equal importance. The discourse in these promotional videos states that ‘mass participation’ regardless of age or fitness level can be facilitated. Similarly, in an article on the ‘expatliving’ website of Singapore,<sup>9</sup> the captain of the British dragon boat team states that the sport is ‘all encompassing’. He goes on to point out that it is ‘one of the very few sports where men and women get to compete in the same team’. He also states: ‘We take in anyone who wants to join, whether they’re fat, thin, tall, short, male or female. Our slogan is: “One team, 16 nationalities, and two goals: Party hard! Paddle harder!’’. This demonstrates how the sport is given *social valuation* (APPRECIATION) as it can accommodate diversity, unlike traditional sports which tend to be single gendered and tend to seek the physically elite. As noted, there is also an inferred JUDGEMENT (*praise*) of the behaviour of the British dragon boat team as it is viewed as accepting of diversity. Dragon

boating is also associated with *happiness (cheer/affection)*, observed from the reference to 'party hard'.

#### 4.1.2. 'Keeping dragon boat afloat'

Despite the symbolism related to an Asian identity, and the community building and diversity associated with dragon boating, several media texts discuss the difficulties the sport is facing. In this respect, *insecurity/disquiet (AFFECT)* is present in the discourse. Dragon boating is described as a sport that is not represented at the Olympics or even the Asian or SEA Games. Therefore, it is not considered as an official competitive sport with the usual formal codes to follow such as the World Anti-Doping Association's (WADA) regulations. A media text in *The Straits Times* relating to this lack of official status refers to the Singapore Dragon Boating Association (SDBA) as 'keeping dragon boat afloat'<sup>10</sup> with its 30-year tradition of annual events. This metaphor of keeping the sport afloat is also represented by an interviewee from Daimler Financial Services in Singapore at a competitive event<sup>11</sup>, who goes as far as saying that it is the region's responsibility to 'not let it die'. Similarly, the notion of the sport requiring active support to prevent it from disappearing is present in Hong Kong media articles. A journalist at The Hong Kong Dragon Boat Festival in Aberdeen fishing port refers to its links to the death of Qu Yuan in 278BC. He writes that these 'elements endure in dragon boat racing' as there is still the tradition of the 'fongzi'.<sup>12</sup> This idea of a sense of *insecurity/disquiet (AFFECT)* due to the possibility that the sport is fading away is reiterated in an article in the *South China Morning Post*.<sup>13</sup> A local Ray Chan participant notes: 'Dragon boat racing has a rich history here and you've got to visit this event if you're a part of Hong Kong'. *Social valuation (APPRECIATION)* is therefore given to these agents who are involved in maintaining dragon boating as a sport. In these cases, there is also an implicit moral *JUDGEMENT (condemn)* that those who do not attend to support it, could be responsible for its potential disappearance.

Although there exists this negative view of the future of dragon boat, it is linked closely to the established socio-political institutions in Singapore and Hong Kong, providing it with *social valuation (APPRECIATION)*, and implicitly *praising (JUDGEMENT)* the establishment for its ongoing participation. The naming of the competitions helps to confer this meaning. There is the 'Prime Minister's Cup' to be won at an annual event for university teams. Similarly, there is the 'President Shield' in Hong Kong and the 'HKSAR Anniversary Dragon Boat Trophy' commemorating Hong Kong's liberation from Britain in 1997. These links with official Heads of State and important historical events at national levels in this Asian region, give it *social valuation (APPRECIATION)*. Moreover, the Singapore Prime Minister is photographed with winning teams several times in the news media. It is also common for other high-ranking officials to present trophies to the winners at competitive events in Hong Kong and Singapore. For example, Singapore's Minister for Education (Higher Education & Skills) and Second Minister for Defence Ong Ye Kung were the guests of honour at several recent dragon boating events. Through this building of *social valuation (APPRECIATION)* regarding the sport, there is also a strong association with *desire (AFFECT)* to preserve it. As noted, the Heads of State are also implicitly judged positively (*praise/JUDGEMENT*) for their participation in this activity.

## 4.2. Corporate discourse

### 4.2.1. Synergy and putting team before self

Dragon boating has much *social valuation* (APPRECIATION) in the corporate discourse. Dragon Boat Innovate's (DBI) Business Manager declares:

Many companies and organisations use the sport of dragon boating as a relevance to educate their staff, that working together is actually literally the same as paddling in the same boat.

Similarly, a corporate member of the Singapore Paddle Club<sup>14</sup> reports that dragon boating is particularly good for team building. The need for the boat to be driven by one collective of paddlers emerges considerably. A member of the Dragon Boat Innovate (DBI) company<sup>15</sup> states:

When you try the sport of dragon boating, that's where everybody will come together with that collective effort to paddle in synergy, paddle in cadence. That's when you realise that success is driven by unity.

Participation in the sport is therefore seen as a way for employees to understand that a successful workplace (social valuation/ APPRECIATION) is also 'driven by unity'.

The need for synchronisation is commonly discussed and contrasted to traditional team sports. The same DBI employee reports how teamwork in a dragon boat is different to traditional sports: 'even if I work in a team, you see a lot of individuals in a team, more (like) a blend'. In the same way, on corporation SembCorp's<sup>16</sup> webpage, the dragon boat page contains the headline 'Many Hearts, One Stroke'. Importance is given to synergy as a team can win even if it is weaker statistically, according to the DBI interviewee: 'A team with lesser strength but better synchronization can actually be a stronger team, right?' 'Teamwork', 'unity', 'focus' and 'alignment' are all concepts referred to as important for dragon boating and performativity. Thus, the very strong need for paddler synchronisation in the sport is given *praise* (JUDGEMENT) and this is linked to 'putting team before self'. Paddlers must pay careful attention to the caller's instructions to ensure precise synchronisation essential for performativity. A standard boat comprises twenty paddlers, a steerperson, facing the bow; and a drummer, standing or sitting high at the bow with a large drum, facing the paddlers. The paddlers sit in pairs. The first pair are the pacers or strokes who establish the team's pace by following the rhythm of the drum. The paddlers behind seek to synchronise their reach with the Stroke on the opposite side. Paddlers on the starboard (right) mimic the pacing of the stroke on the port side (left) and vice versa. If paddlers are not paddling in unison, an effect similar to the movement of a centipede is produced and a significantly slower boat, the result. Therefore, although strength is important, synchronisation is essential. This is also linked to *happiness/affection* (AFFECT) in several texts. For example, one corporate member of the Singapore Paddle Club states: 'It's a very different feeling when you're all paddling in a boat and everyone is working towards the same goal - you can't find it in an individual sport'.

The concept of synchronisation is also given strong *social valuation* (APPRECIATION) in the corporate environment. The sport of dragon boating might be developed in corporations in these cities because it requires disciplined subordination to authority, which is also a fundamental element of Confucianism (Chen & Chung, 1994). This philosophy is argued by political scientists to exist as a part of the corporate culture in both Hong Kong and Singapore (Chen & Chung, 1994; Kuah 1990). Community should also come before self in Confucianist thought. Thus, the Confucianist culture of following a leader might be linked to following the beating of the drum and the pacers. It appears from the interviews with corporations involved in dragon boating that *social valuation* (APPRECIATION) is given to this disciplined subordination and acceptance of authority in both environments. It also appears that the ability to provide exemplary synergy in the boat is given *praise* (JUDGEMENT). A successful dragon boating team is said to be excellent for corporate ‘brand building’ and a strong image advertised at events can be a powerful message to other corporations. In this way, the practices of a corporate dragon boat team are also viewed with *admiration* (AFFECT).

#### *4.2.2. Tenacity, spirit of excellence and competition*

Reported on the DBS newsroom webpage<sup>17</sup>, DBS Singapore Country Head, states that the DBS Marina Regatta ‘demonstrates our tenacious spirit’ and it ‘plays to our spirit of excellence and competition’. These ideas of tenacity, excellence and competition as elements of corporate culture are viewed with *esteem/admire* (JUDGEMENT). Not only are these seen as essential learning areas for dragon boating but also as important in the corporate context. According to SAVA<sup>18</sup>, employees, participating in dragon boating might lead to ‘increased productivity and effectiveness’ and ‘decreased absenteeism’ at work as ‘tenacity’ in participants is developed. This provides strong *social valuation* (APPRECIATION) to the sport as an institution helping to maintain the smooth running of the Hong Kong and Singapore societies. Further, corporate dragon boat victories in national competitions demonstrate a ‘spirit of excellence’ in corporations separating the best from the crowd. It also allows the merits of exemplary employees, or as Deal and Kennedy (1982) state, ‘heroes’ who ‘have an edge’, to be rewarded as posters of the team are published at corporate dragon boating events and on intranets. This focus on modelling what is ‘good and successful’ can also be linked to Confucianist ideals. Therefore, *esteem/admire* (JUDGEMENT) is an important element of the Hong Kong and Singapore corporate environments. This might also help towards the sport’s popularity in these cities.

#### *4.2.3. Corporate responsibility and environmentalism*

Corporate responsibility and environmentalism are also becoming increasingly linked to dragon boating in the region. The sport is connected to *condemning* (JUDGEMENT) behaviour negatively impacting the environment. In a 2014 Straits Times article, Dr Chia Shi-Lu, Singapore Dragon Boat Association president<sup>19</sup> points out how the annual Singapore River Regatta focus not only on the sport but also on raising awareness about the environment and in particular ‘the importance of keeping our water bodies clean’. The mascot for the 2014 regatta was Bobby the hawksbill turtle to promote environmental conservation. Similarly, in an article from

2019, the DBS Marina Regatta in Singapore also features ‘carnival activities centred on sustainability and environmental issues’. The headline for the article is ‘DBS Regatta goes green’.<sup>20</sup> At the festival, solar energy is used; urban farming is presented; there are also activities demonstrating marine life in the oceans and how they are impacted by plastic waste. Similarly, in Hong Kong, a South China Morning Post article,<sup>21</sup> offers the heading ‘Enter the dragon boat: Hong Kong rowers brave 12 hours in Taiwan waters for green fundraiser’. An event, organised by Dragon Overtime, a dragon boat team, set out to raise HK\$5.3 million to help support clean-up efforts of the rivers in that region. It appears therefore that some corporations involved in dragon boating are trying to raise awareness about the harmful practices impacting the environment and the importance of conservation. This discourse also helps to provide *social valuation* (APPRECIATION) to the sport as a vehicle through which these essential awareness-raising messages can be conveyed.

### 4.3. Individual mental and physical health benefits

#### 4.3.1. Physical fitness, discipline, mental toughness and being close to nature

Dragon boating is a very intensive sport with 1000 metre races covered in about 5 minutes. Mental and physical strength are reported as essential requirements from athletes in multiple sources. The Singapore Dragon Boat Association states on its website<sup>22</sup> that ‘Dragon boating is an excellent sport which strongly promotes the important intrinsic life values of teamwork, discipline, physical fitness and mental toughness.’ Similarly, articles on individual paddlers such as one in *The Straits Times*<sup>23</sup> often reference how doing a sport such as dragon boating develops ‘mental strength, resilience and discipline’. In several other texts, such as the following from Hong Kong paddlers,<sup>24</sup> it is stated that ‘you need discipline to go beyond the pain’. References to individual benefits from being close to nature in the dragon boat are also common. This is linked to ‘an absolute sense of freedom’ and ‘mental well-being’ (Dragon-Boat Innovate, DBI.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in a UNESCO<sup>26</sup> source discussing the cultural heritage of Asian sport, a harmonious and healthy relationship between humanity and nature is said to develop from dragon boating. In these cases, feelings such as *happiness/affection* (AFFECT) are evoked about the sport as well as a moral JUDGEMENT related to *praise* for dragon boating, which harmoniously abides with nature. In this case, dragon boating might be compared to sports such as golf and motor racing, which are well-known for their negative impact on the environment (*condemn*/JUDGEMENT).

#### 4.3.2. Women cancer survivors

There are also several reports of dragon boat teams entirely comprised of cancer survivors. Survivors of breast cancer are said to join together to paddle dragon boats to the benefit of their physical health and social wellbeing. Women who have suffered with breast cancer are at risk of developing lymphedema following surgical and/or medical treatment of the disease. Because of this, they were advised not to participate in any upper body activity. However, women’s dragon boat teams have sprung up to challenge this medical suggestion. Dragon boating has had positive

results on participants' health. This indicates a moral JUDGEMENT (*esteem/admire*) for participation in the sport as a positive act defying negative, limiting medical advice. In this context, a moral JUDGEMENT related to *condemning* the medical authority is also present as these paddlers spoke out against this initial advice to avoid upper body activity. Several teams in Hong Kong and Singapore are now supported by the International Breast Cancer Paddlers' Commission (IBCPC). They have proven that the sport can have very positive impacts on their health.

There is a Singapore team known as the 'Paddlers in Pink'<sup>27</sup> comprising only breast cancer survivors and supporters. The group is portrayed in *The Straits Times*.<sup>28</sup> The dragon boaters are publicized as part of a campaign to raise awareness about the importance of conducting regular mammograms. According to the article, less than forty per cent of women aged between fifty and sixty-nine undergo breast cancer screening. On the webpage of the 'Paddlers in Pink', they state that on their Pink Boats an important message is provided: 'Early Detection Saves Lives, Saves Breasts!' Additionally, the team's tagline is 'We can, we dare, we live it! Paddlers in Pink Rock!' This idea of daring and living is also brought up in an article on a Paddler in Pink.<sup>29</sup> Breast cancer survivor Irene Chui states that she enjoys dragon boating because of the need for 'endurance' and 'perseverance'. These are both characteristics she has needed in her fight with cancer. In this report, the journalist demonstrates *admiration* (AFFECT) for the dragon boater. This also conveys the message that individuals are responsible for their own lives (moral JUDGEMENT/*esteem/admire*). Additionally, in this aspect of the dragon boating discourse, the sport is given *social valuation* (APPRECIATION) as a vehicle for maintaining breast cancer survivors' health in both Hong Kong and Singapore.

#### 4.4. Tragedy

Dragon boating is linked to tragedy in Singaporean discourse. In 2007 in Cambodia, the Singaporean national dragon boat capsized during a training run. Several local news sources cover the incident. Channel News Asia devoted a five-part series in November 2017 to mark the 10th anniversary of the accident, which left five Singaporean national dragon-boaters dead. One of these parts is written by journalist Justin Ong, who was a member of the crew of the boat team.<sup>30</sup> It is entitled 'I escaped death. 5 of my teammates didn't' and is accompanied with a local spectator's video of the tragedy. Ong recollects his experiences in Phnom Penh on the river Tonle Sap or 'large river', connecting to the Mekong. The currents of the river were strong: 'churning, surging, spitting me back at speeds of up to 8 knots - as fast as the most ferocious white-water rapids', he recollects. When the boat crashes into a pontoon at speed, which is about 50-square metres in size, set up for the event, it quickly sinks, with the athletes still seated in it. The 22 crew members spend the next few moments in the pitch-black darkness fighting the currents trying to escape from underneath the pontoon. Ong was lucky. He remarks:

I was last to be picked up, with my teammate on a rescue boat grabbing me by the tights as I floated past lifelessly. I hazily recall choking on water as I came to, a local's open mouth hovering over mine, his fist on my chest.

In the fifth part of the report, Bryan Kieu, former coach of the women's national team and national paddler states that the 'event helped trigger some shaking up of the whole ecosystem' and that 'attention, resources and energy were pooled to make things happen'. Because of the tragedy, dragon boating in Singapore became better funded and organised. In 2007, the men's team participated in the world championships and since then, men's, women's and mixed teams have won medals at multiple international dragon boating events. Kieu posits that these achievements were in large part because the community was 'determined to do it right and move forward on a fresh note' after the Cambodia tragedy.

In these recounts and reflections on the incident, language tends to not only exhibit tragedy and feelings of *unhappiness/misery* (AFFECT) but there is also inferred a moral JUDGEMENT (*condemn*) of the mismanagement of the event in Cambodia. When Ong recounts his narrative, he refers several times to the 'conditions'. As he describes these conditions, he invokes a lack of organisation through feelings of *displeasure* (AFFECT). For example, he states: 'a topless toddler defecated into the river' and a villager was 'rinsing clothes near the team's rest area'. Ong also refers to the 'abnormality of the river'. The Tonle Sap is known as the 'reversing river' because the force of water rushing through it causes its current to be reversed. For four to five months, the river flows upstream instead of down. This anomaly causes a 'ferocious' current. Together these characteristics demonstrate that it was not a well-managed event, inferring a moral JUDGEMENT (*condemn*) of the organisers in Cambodia.

## 5. Conclusion

From this study of the language related to dragon boating in multiple diverse texts providing a corpus of over 100 000 words, it is evident that this sport helps to build and maintain the identities of the cities of Hong Kong and Singapore through a number of semiotic associations. A considerable extent of discourse is concentrated on fun experienced at festivals (*happiness/cheer/AFFECT*). Additionally, dragon boat's historical and cultural *interest* (AFFECT) as an Asian sport and how traditions have been kept alive through the centuries are consistently evoked. In relation to this tradition, *social valuation* (APPRECIATION) is also present as the sport can be seen as an institutionalised social identifier. That is also represented by the establishment often being associated with the sport. Appearances of Prime Ministers, and other important members of state, at festival events lends the sport credibility and status despite its lack of recognition by sporting organisations such as the International Olympic Committee. The establishment is often *esteemed* and *admired* (JUDGEMENT) for its participation at these events. Overseas, in Uganda, or in races with the North Koreans, dragon boating is also connected to feelings of *security/trust* (AFFECT) as relationships between nations are strengthened through the sport. Dragon boating is also strongly linked to the corporate world of Singapore and Hong Kong. In this milieu, it is said to be an activity offering ideal opportunities for shows of team building and excellence (JUDGEMENT/*esteem/admire*). This is also the way the Confucianism connects to both corporate culture and dragon boating. This philosophy holds similar characteristics such as a respect for excellence and a strong loyalty to hierarchy (Chen & Chung, 1994) represented in the value of *xiao* or filial piety. Apart from that, the language of dragon boating

tends to focus on the sport as a means to develop mental and physical strength and, interestingly, is taken up by a particular group of cancer survivors because of its focus on upper body strength. In this context, a moral JUDGEMENT (condemn) of the medical field is present as well as more (JUDGEMENT/*esteem/admire*) for cancer survivor participants. Finally, tragedy is connected to the sport's modern history with the national team's boat accident in 2007 in Cambodia.

## Notes

\* Received: May 9, 2019; Accepted: October 15, 2019.

1 *The Straits Times*, <https://www.straitstimes.com/>; *The South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/frontpage/international>, and *Channel News Asia*, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/>.

2 *DBS*, <https://www.dbs.com/corporate-citizenship/dbs-in-the-community/dbs-marina-regatta/default.page>, and *HSBC*, <https://www.facebook.com/HsbcCommercialBankingDragonBoatTeam/>.

3 *SAVA*, [https://www.facebook.com/pg/SG.SAVA/events/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/SG.SAVA/events/?ref=page_internal), and *Dragon-Boat Innovate (DBI)*, <http://www.dbi.com.sg/>

4 See <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/community/article/2151239/hong-kong-celebrates-dragon-boat-festival-rowing-rituals>.

5 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/africa/dragon-boat-festival-in-uganda-bridges-peoples-and-cultures>.

6 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/sport/unified-koreas-first-medal>.

7 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/sport/more-than-3000-turn-up-for-singapore-dragon-boat-festival-sim-rule-in-prime-ministers-cup>.

8 See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X5a\\_4zoS\\_I#t=198](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X5a_4zoS_I#t=198).

9 See <https://expatliving.sg/interview-paul-robinson-on-dragon-boating-in-singapore/>.

10 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/sport/keeping-dragon-boating-afloat>.

11 See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X5a\\_4zoS\\_I#t=198](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X5a_4zoS_I#t=198).

12 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/multimedia/photos/soaked-in-fun-at-dragon-boat-festival>.

13 See <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/community/article/2151239/hong-kong-celebrates-dragon-boat-festival-rowing-rituals>.

14 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/sport/dragon-boating-ex-national-lindsay-tan-relishes-new-racing-experience-with-singapore-paddle>.

15 See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X5a\\_4zoS\\_I#t=198](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X5a_4zoS_I#t=198).

16 See [https://www.semcorp.com/internal\\_enewsletter/sepoct10/ppl\\_Dragon\\_Boat\\_Race.htm](https://www.semcorp.com/internal_enewsletter/sepoct10/ppl_Dragon_Boat_Race.htm).

17 See [https://www.dbs.com/newsroom/DBS\\_Marina\\_Regatta\\_returns\\_bigger\\_than\\_ever\\_as\\_DBs\\_celebrates\\_its\\_Golden\\_Jubilee](https://www.dbs.com/newsroom/DBS_Marina_Regatta_returns_bigger_than_ever_as_DBs_celebrates_its_Golden_Jubilee).

18 See <http://www.sava.com.sg/>.

19 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/paddlers-at-singapore-river-regatta-encouraged-to-protect-environment>.

20 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/sport/dbs-regatta-goes-green>.

21 See <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/2138611/enter-dragon-boat-hong-kong-rowers-brave-12-hours>.

22 See <http://sdba.org.sg/events/11th-national-inter-schools-dragon-boat-championship-2011-2/>.

23 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/dragon-boat-training-helps-him-unwind>.

24 See <https://vrcpaddleclub.com/>.

25 See <http://www.dbi.com.sg/>.

26 See <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/dragon-boat-festival-00225>.

27 See <https://www.facebook.com/BCFPIP>.

28 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/pink-train-to-highlight-breast-cancer-risks>

29 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/dragon-boating-helps-mum-grow-young>.

30 See <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-dragonboat-tragedy-escaped-death-5-teammates-9402316>.

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