Dragon boat race makes a splash on 'Half Marathon Suzhou Creek' in Putuo

Yang Jian

Shanghai's annual dragon boat race on Suzhou Creek concluded on June 18 in Putuo District. Along the newly unveiled "Half Marathon Suzhou Creek" section in Putuo, the participating teams from across the world raced the pleasant waterway, and experienced its liveliness and vitality.

The race, serving as one leg of the 2023 China Dragon Boat Open Tournament, attracted 52 teams from home and abroad.

After two days of competition, team Guangdong Foshan and team Dongguan became the men's and women's champions of China Dragon Boat Open in the elite category. Shanghai Ocean University was crowned in the public category.

"The overall level of the teams is very high, and the competition is intense," said Leonora Escollante, the team leader of the Philippine Canoeing and Kayaking Federation Dragon Boat Team. "The racecourse conditions are excellent, which allows us to achieve good results."

The Malaysia Golden Arm Dragon Boat Team traveled a long way and started systematic training in the city several days ago to achieve good results in the competition.

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>
> **Yap Chee Kian**
> Member of the Malaysian team

When they arrived at the competition venue, the team members were immediately attracted by the excellent competition environment, according to the team leader.

"The water here is clear, the shore is green, the river is smooth, and the scenery is beautiful," said Yap Chee Kian, a member of the Malaysian team. "It feels very comfortable to paddle a dragon boat on the Suzhou Creek.

"The atmosphere of the competition is also great. Whether it's training or formal competition, there are many spectators cheering us along the coast."

For Li Yantang, leader of team Macau, it's her eighth visit to Shanghai.

"Every time I arrive, I get the feeling that I'm returning home," Li said.

Compared to four years ago, there have been many changes in recent years, and the scenery along the Suzhou Creek is amazing, said Li.

"I still remember my first race in Shanghai was in 1999, the year that Macau returned to China. That was meaningful," Li added.

Despite the heavy rain in the morning, many citizens still showed up in the spectator areas to cheer for the rowers. The competition was held prior to this year's Dragon Boat Festival, which falls on June 22.

"Racing dragon boats on the Suzhou Creek during the Dragon Boat Festival is a continuation of excellent Chinese traditional culture," said Xiao Wengao, deputy director of Putuo District. "It is a vivid display of the spirit of dragon boat racing that promotes unity and competition, and a grand gathering of friends from all over the world."

The dragon boat races held in Putuo every year have attracted global attention to promote the rich cultural heritage and maritime traditions of the creek, Xiao said.

The participating teams and their members have shared heart-warming stories beyond the excitement of the competition, he noted.

Broadened horizons

The Shanghai Information Technology School Dragon Boat Team, composed of students from southwest China's Yunnan Province was among the rowers during this year's competition.

They benefited from China's poverty alleviation policies. Yang Jun, one of the students, said such race gave the students from Yunnan a chance to broaden their horizons.

"Participating in such activities provides us with comprehensive improvement in knowledge, skills and spirits," said Yang.

Under the leadership of Jin Jing, who carried the torch overseas during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Putuo District Disability and Health Integrated Dragon Boat Team was composed of physically challenged rowers.

More than 50 dragon boat teams from home and abroad race down the Suzhou Creek during the annual dragon boat competition, attracting spectators who stop by to cheer on the paddlers. — All photos by Ti Gong

Although they did not achieve top rankings, Jin expressed gratitude for the opportunity for them to paddle on the Suzhou Creek.

The dragon boat race allowed the team, which includes many hearing-impaired athletes, to integrate into the national sports environment and contribute to the promotion of inclusive sports, Jin said.

The event also featured several other characteristic teams, such as the Shanghai Pink Angels Dragon Boat Team composed of breast cancer survivors, the South Pole Dragon Boat Team consisting of crew members from China's Antarctic scientific expeditions.

By organizing the dragon boat races, Putuo has not only highlighted the sport but also shared the story of sports development in Putuo.

The well-planned and organized event ensured a spectacular, safe and high-quality dragon boat competition, according to the district government.

The Putuo District Education Bureau Dragon Boat Team, the Sanlin Town Chamber of Commerce Dragon Boat Team and the Shanghai Taopu Middle School Dragon Boat Team secured victories in various categories of the invitational race.

To accommodate the public's enthusiasm for this traditional dragon boat race, a section of the northern bank of the Suzhou Creek was opened for spectators. Within a short span of two days, nearly 10,000 reservations were made to watch the race in the area.

Furthermore, the organizing committee expanded the reach of the event by creating short videos that showcased the dragon boat races and the stories associated with the Suzhou Creek and life in Putuo.

These videos, featuring three expatriates living in Shanghai, were shared on domestic and international platforms, contributing to the promotion of the "Putuo Dragon Boat" as one of the calling cards of the city.

The Dragon Boat Race in Putuo District has once again become an integral part of people's lives, promoting the spirit of dragon boat racing and its contemporary value in this world-class waterfront area, said Gu Weiling, director of the Putuo District Sports Bureau.

"Putuo is not only rich in historical heritage but also full of vitality," Gu said.

Gu said Putuo will continue building a "golden sports system" for "Half-marathon Suzhou Creek" competitions in all categories.

Suzhou Creek, known as the "mother river" of Shanghai, is set to become demonstration of how a megacity can achieve quality development and life.

The creek is actually a 125-kilometer waterway that originates in Taihu Lake in neighboring Jiangsu Province and winds through the cities of Suzhou, Kunshan and Shanghai before finally emptying into the Huangpu River at the West Bund.

'Mother river' of Shanghai

Since Shanghai opened its port to the world in 1843, the creek has been the backdrop for dramatic watersheds in the city's history. It was the scene of wartime suffering and the birthplace of China's earliest national industries.

The longest part of the creek is in Putuo, accounting for half of its downtown section, known as the "Half Marathon Suzhou Creek."

The "Half Marathon Suzhou Creek" is mapped out on the 21-km-long riverside section in Putuo, which aims to become a "sitting room" for the Yangtze River Delta region and a world-class waterfront.

As the creek passes through Putuo, it flows through the history of Shanghai's growth into an industrial city, according to the Putuo Culture and Tourism Bureau. Waterfront redevelopment preserves that heritage.

Beginning in the first decade of the 20th century, Chinese entrepreneurs built national industries, including textiles, flour, beer, minting and printing, along the most zigzagged section of the creek, known as the "18 bays."

Factories were established in what is now northwest Putuo to take advantage of convenient water transport.

1,000

More than 1,000 sports, cultural and tourism events have been announced along the riverside section in Putuo.

The waterfront section known as Baocheng Bay, for instance, was home to a fifth of China's earliest textile factories, dating back to the 1920s.

After 1949, the Shanghai No. 1, 6 and 7 cotton factories were located on the waterfront, along with a military warehouse for quilts and uniforms. The site was dubbed the "cradle of China's textile industry."

Many of the former factory areas have been preserved by converting them for modern use, including the now popular M50 art hub, which opened in 2000, and the X Tower specialty park.

Walls and fences in parks and residential neighborhoods have been removed to allow convenient public access to the waterfront.

More than 1,000 sports, cultural and tourism events have been announced along the riverside section in Putuo.

The 2023 Shanghai Elite 10K Race, which has become one of the world's top elite races, will also be held on October 15. The route covers some of the signature landmarks in Putuo, including Changfeng Park and the half marathon park.

On the water, an urban elite regatta was held in Putuo on April 29 to gather amateur teams from local enterprises, clubs and universities. It became another key regatta on the creek, in addition to the Head of the Shanghai River Regatta at the mouth of the creek.

The Suzhou Creek Dragon Boat Race was launched in 2004 to highlight the results of a clean-up campaign on the waterway. It had become an important fixture in Putuo, as it showcased the city's commitment to the environment and rapid urban development, according to Putuo government.

Other public sports competitions, including paddle boarding, frisbee, rugby and drone flying will invite amateur citizens to compete along the creek through December.

The 2023 Half Marathon Suzhou Creek Culture and Art Festival will be held from September to October, featuring more than 1,000 activities at cultural venues, shopping complexes, sightseeing spots and communities along the creek in Putuo.

As part of Shanghai International Arts Festival, the Putuo festival has become a popular attraction in the city and the Yangtze River Delta region.

The festival has been held for more than a dozen consecutive years and become a characteristic brand of the district's public culture, attracting more than 500,000 participants a year on average.

The race on the Suzhou Creek offers a unique view of the urban landscape.