

His family has also carried the torch. While he admits he is “not athletic” himself, his granddaughter captained the Maple Leaf Dragon Boat Club and competed in the Pan Am Championships in Tobago in 2019, ensuring a third generation continues the tradition. The Siu Chongs demonstrate pride in culture and that dragon boating is a lasting intergenerational heritage.

The festival’s growth has been striking. What began as a celebration of Chinese heritage has become a truly multiethnic event. Although less than five percent of participants are Chinese, dragon boating now attracts schools, community teams, and athletes of every background. Inter-school regattas draw enthusiastic crowds, with parents and classmates filling the shores. “It shows that Trinidad has embraced the Chinese culture,” Siu Chong says proudly. “It is rewarding to see all nations paddling in the dragon boat.”

Sustaining the festival financially is not without challenges. Corporate and community sponsors, along with support from the Chinese embassy, remain crucial, but deficits sometimes arise. For Franco, the greatest risk is not financial but environmental. “The biggest risk is the weather,” he admits, noting that wind and rain can delay the races. Yet, despite uncertainties, the event continues to thrive.

Over time, the balance of participation has shifted. Corporate teams once dominated, with banks, insurers, and telecommunications firms competing fiercely. Today,

schools are leading the charge, and Franco sees both opportunity and challenge in that shift. He hopes to rekindle corporate involvement while nurturing youth engagement, ensuring a broad and sustainable base for the sport.

Beyond its athletic appeal, the Dragon Boat Festival plays a vital role in strengthening cultural ties. Alongside the Temple Fair for the Chinese New Year, it is an occasion when the Chinese community in Trinidad comes out in their numbers. The embassy’s support has reinforced the festival as a bridge between China and Trinidad and Tobago, while its openness to all has made it a vibrant symbol of multiculturalism.

Looking back, Franco remembers the teasing he endured as a young boy for being Chinese. Times have changed. Today, he sees a younger generation proud of their heritage, embracing both Chinese traditions and Trinidadian identity. The festival, in his view, embodies this blend: a celebration of Chinese culture, rooted firmly in the soil of Trinidad and Tobago.

Next year, the festival will mark the 220th anniversary of Chinese arrival. Franco hopes it will be “so much bigger,” building on nearly two decades of growth. But for him, the fulfilment lies less in size than in spirit. “My most pride is to see so much non-Chinese participation,” he says. “It brings my culture, my heritage, to my country. I am Trinidadian, and this festival is part of who I am.”

