

STEERING THE DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL IN THE HEMISPHERE

By Sharon Ali Aziz

When the dragon boats slice through the waters of Chaguaramas, their rhythmic drumming and fierce paddling are more than a spectacle of sport. They tell a story of cultural pride, dedication, and one man's vision. For nearly two decades, Franco Siu Chong has been at the heart of the Dragon Boat Festival in Trinidad and Tobago, guiding it from a commemorative event into a beloved national celebration.

Siu Chong's journey with the festival began in 2005, when the late president George Maxwell Richards encouraged Prof David Picou to mark the bicentenary of Chinese arrival in Trinidad and Tobago with something meaningful. Picou assembled a committee, and Franco—already active in the Chinese Association—joined. It was his daughter-in-law, a dragon boater in Toronto, who first suggested introducing the sport locally. On a business trip to Hong Kong, Franco attended the famous Stanley Dragon Boat Festival. Captivated by the energy and community spirit, he returned convinced that dragon boating could take root in Trinidad.



Richalene Siu Chong and Franco Siu Chong, on Sept 6th, 2025.
Photo:-
Ishmael Salandy

The challenge, however, was financing. Each boat cost about US\$7,000, and the association could not shoulder the burden. Franco spearheaded sponsorships, persuading companies in different industries to join his own retail company to support. Six boats were purchased, and in 2006, the festival debuted as part of the Chinese Bicentennial celebrations. It was an instant success, drawing government support and wide public interest.

For Siu Chong, dragon boating quickly became more than an event. He embraced leadership roles on the international stage, serving as Caribbean commissioner for the International Dragon Boat Federation and president of the Pan American Dragon Boat Federation. He took on a pioneering role and with his guidance, dragon boating spread from Trinidad to Panama, the Bahamas, Jamaica, Brazil, and Argentina. "This festival is just the festival that started it all," he reflects, "and we do it every year."