



Boat builder Neil Beken, of Beachhaven, Auckland, discusses finer details of the canoe's construction with the head of the Turangawaewae carving group, Hikairo Herangi (left), fellow carver Leo Muru, and the president of the North Shore Canoe Club, Gerry Maire.

Enter the dragon boat

An international Chinese festival has reawakened interest in maori canoe racing. The North Shore Canoe Club, with the help of maori people, have built and launched a waka tete that will travel to the Hong Kong dragon boat festival in June.

Long ago in China a great poet and scholar Qu Yuan drowned himself in the Mi Lo river in protest against the injustice and corruption of his emperor.

Local fishermen, witnessing the tragedy, raced their boats to rescue him. But they were too late, and sadly threw rice dumplings into the water to draw the fish away from his body as they mourned his death.

Today the Chinese communities of Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, San Diego and Hawaii, as well as the Peoples' Republic of China, hold dragon boat races to re-enact the feverish race of the fishermen towards Qu Yuan's body.

They invite teams from other countries to join in, and last year, the Singapore community extended an invitation to New Zealand.

A team comprising mostly members of Auckland's North Shore Canoe Club took up their paddles and landed third prize in the festival — so triggering a keen interest here in the concept of dragon boat racing.

Club members Gerry Maire (president) and Maryrose Pigott figured that

maori mythology included a New Zealand dragon — the taniwha — so why not have maori canoe racing festivals in New Zealand along the lines of the dragon boat races.

On their return home to Auckland, Mr Maire and Mrs Pigott investigated the idea of building a maori canoe to take back to the Singapore festival this year, to show to the Singaporeans and the teams that come from Australia, the Philippines, the United States, Indonesia, Brunei, Japan, West Germany, India and the United Kingdom.

They knew the team couldn't race such a craft as it would not conform to requirements laid down, but what an impact it would make during the elaborate parades leading up to the main races. (For the actual racing they will be allocated a traditional dragon boat.)

The results of Mr Maire's and Mrs Pigott's efforts can be seen in the Glenfield boat building shed of Neil Beken.

Financed by Air New Zealand, which saw the canoe as an ideal vehicle to draw attention to New Zealand, Mr Beken has built a 12-metre long vessel

adhering to traditional maori design where possible.

To ensure this he and a group of assistants gleaned information on the various types of maori canoes from museum archives in the North and South Islands of New Zealand. The group included the editor of the Traditional Small Craft Society's journal, Peter McCurdy, of Auckland.

They also worked closely with the maori people of Ngaruwahia's Turangawaewae marae who carried out the carving on the canoe.

The canoe — of waka tete design and size — is made of modern materials, but includes New Zealand woods such as kauri. Like some used by the maori people, it breaks down into pieces so that it can be more readily transported.

Maori people once carried their canoes in manageable components across the land, reassembling them ready to paddle in some other lake or river; today's canoe divides into three pieces so that Air New Zealand can pack it on to an aircraft pallet and carry it many thousands of miles in the cargo holds of its Boeing 747s.

It makes its first airborne journey to Singapore at the beginning of June, and will go from there to the annual Hong Kong festival before returning home several weeks later.

Air New Zealand plans to fly it to subsequent festivals in a similar way.

Meanwhile, copies of the canoe will be made available for a New Zealand festival of maori canoe racing which the North Shore Canoe Club's New Zealand Dragon Boat (Taniwha) Association plans to hold in Auckland next year.

Dragon boat festivals are colourful and spectacular, and watched by thousands of people. They are considered to be not just a sporting fixture, but also an important cultural exchange between peoples of the Pacific Basin.

It is considered that our maori canoe will enrich this exchange and bring about a greater understanding of our country.

The craft are paddled by people from all walks of life during the festivals... hotels, business houses, factories, schools, and many different sports clubs enter teams. The boats are sponsored by the business community, carrying the company's name clearly on the bow as they whip through the water, paddles flashing.

The waka tete canoe being built now will be called "Air New Zealand" and will be decorated with the airline's distinctive koru trademark — which symbolises new life.