

The Internationalization of **Sumo**: 60 Foreign Rikishis' Fighting Spirit

By Shimokado Yoko

Japanese people enjoy sumo, eating *yakitori*, skewered grilled chicken at the Kokugikan in Ryogoku. Recently there has been a conspicuous increase in the number of fans munching popcorn: spectators from other countries. This is due to the fact that a large number of *rikishis*, or sumo wrestlers from overseas, have suddenly come to the forefront of the sport. Currently there are 60 foreign rikishis from 12 nations: Mongolia, Brazil, China, South Korea, Russia, Tonga, Georgia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Estonia and Hungary. Of the 722 rikishis in professional sumo, approximately one in 12 is from abroad, as of November, 2005.

Surprisingly enough, the internationalization of sumo began quite some time ago. Prior to World War II, in an effort to popularize sumo abroad, rikishis were sent to tour the United States, and seven 2nd- and 3rd-generation Japanese-Americans from Los Angeles and Hawaii entered the world of sumo. After the war, beginning around 1958, foreign rikishis began to enter sumo once again. Most significant, however, has been the rapid increase since the heyday of Takamiyama, who is now named Azumazeki *oyakata* (coach), and the *shisho* (master) of former *Yokozuna* (Grand Champion) Akebono. Reflecting the increase of foreign spectators, the Nihon Sumo Kyokai made English booklets explaining the history and the fundamental rules of sumo in 1960. The groundswell of success began with Hawaiians, broadened by Mongolians and is now enlivened with the influx of rikishis from Russia and European nations.

While the situation varies by country, for these foreign rikishis, who have virtually no initial knowledge of Japan or the Japanese language, to get accustomed to the peculiar customs and traditions of the sumo world, to endure the strenuous practices and to gain a handful of success,

requires truly exceptional effort and dedication. Even to Japanese, the sumo world maintains distinct characteristics of old Japan, as evidenced by the fact that rikishis still have *chonmage* topknots and wear kimonos.

Banzuke Society

After entering the sumo world, rikishis rise through the banzuke (official rankings) in order: *Jonokuchi*, *Jonidan*, *Sandanme*, *Makushita*, *Juryo* and *Makuuchi*. A rikishi's rank in the banzuke depends entirely on the results he achieves in the six major tournaments held throughout the year. While it is taken for granted in most professional sports that records and results have an impact on one's income, the banzuke rankings further affect almost every aspect of daily life. Especially, there are significant differences between the Makushita and Juryo divisions. For example, up through the rank of Makushita, rikishis receive an allowance and bonuses per win for each regular tournament they participate in, but do not receive a salary. They only become free in a true sense when they are allowed to have the *oicho* (gingko-leaf topknot), symbol of a full-fledged, salaried *Sumotori* (rikishi) of the Juryo and Makuuchi ranks.

Even mealtimes and the order of taking baths are determined by banzuke rank. The only thing that the lower-rankings are allowed to do first is to get up earlier for morning practice. Naturally enough, the materials and color of the *mawashi* (belt) that the rikishi wears in the *dohyo* (ring) is determined by rank, so is everything else that they wear. No matter how cold it may be, the Jonokuchi and Jonidan are only allowed to wear a single layer *yukata*. No muffler or coat to keep them warm. For the Sandanme and below, the *obi* (sash) is an inexpensive *chirimen* material. Starting with the Makushita division, a slightly more expensive *Hakata* obi is permitted. Footwear for the Jonokuchi and Jonidan is restricted to *geta* (wooden clogs). Footwear called *setta*, sandals with leather soles, are allowed once a rikishi rises to Sandanme. Even these *setta* have ranks, those with woven-bamboo surfaces are only worn by *seki-tori* (Juryo and Makuuchi). The rikishi must maintain a strict code of conduct that is also determined by the banzuke rank. Even to contemporary Japanese, the sumo world seems considerably antiquated and feudalistic. Due to the severity of this world, there is no small number of new entrants who drop out shortly after arriving, so it must be even harder to the foreign rikishi who may find the world entirely incomprehensible at first.

Photo: The Mainichi Newspapers



Kotooshu from Bulgaria (right), defeating Yokozuna Asashoryu from Mongolia. He achieved the most rapid promotion to Ozeki in sumo history after taking part in 19 tournaments

A Day of a Rikishi

The daily schedule differs slightly according to the stable, but generally morning practice begins early, from five or six o'clock, and the lower ranks finish their own training before the higher-ranking sekitori appear sometime around eight. The lower ranks then tend to their duties as *chanko kakari* (those responsible for preparing meals) or *tsukebito* (personal attendants to the sekitori). After the head of the stable, the coaches and the sekitori have finished their breakfast, the lower ranks are at long last able to have their own meals. In addition, they are also responsible for cleaning the rooms and bathrooms of the stable, doing the laundry and running errands for the sekitori.

On top of this, until one reaches the rank of sekitori, one does not receive a room of one's own but instead sleeps and spends whatever free time remains with the other rikishis in one large room. It seems considerably stressful for these lower-ranking rikishis to have no privacy at all 24 hours a day. The sekitori Baruto, from Estonia, says that when he earned the rank of Juryo, he was happy to have his own room more than anything else. He adds cheerfully that he had purchased his favorite blue color curtains for his room.* However, it appears that these spartan environment are the key for the foreign rikishis to master the language rapidly. Each of the foreign rikishis, in the course of about a year, manages to learn enough Japanese to survive in daily life. In the sumo world, where everything begins and ends with appropriate etiquette, foreign rikishis are first of all taught the sumo formalities of *ohayo gozaimasu* (the first greeting of the day), *gotchan desu* (thank you) and *otsukaresama de gozaimasu* (an expression of gratitude at the end of occasions). Sleeping and eating together this way, they are totally immersed in the world of sumo.

The Tsukebito System

Even the Russian brothers Roho and Hakurozan, who knew the names of the Makuuchi rikishis from watching sumo in their homeland and were fairly well acquainted with the world of sumo, say there were a number of surprises awaiting them. In particular, they were unable to grasp the importance of the tsukebito. Upon seeing the tsukebito washing and shampooing the sekitori in the bath, they wondered why anyone needed help in doing what he could do for himself. They also say that it was very hard for them to follow orders from superiors when they still did not understand the Japanese language very well.

Kokkai, who entered sumo at the age of 19 from



Kokkai (left) and Hakurozan



Ama from Mongolia (left) and Roho

Georgia, confesses that he wondered why he had to take orders from younger rikishis. He might have felt it was unreasonable to do such chores as cleaning the practice hall because he was a European champion in wrestling.

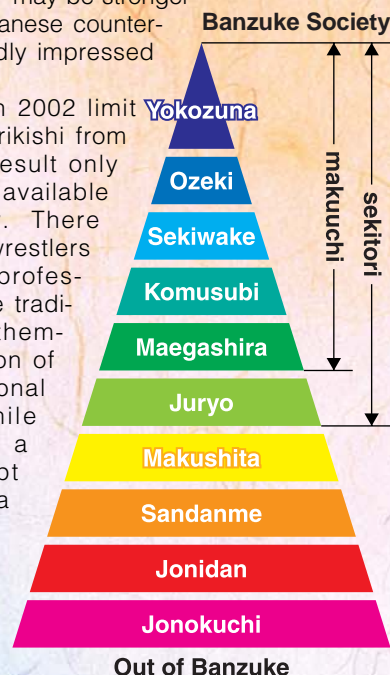
Yet now that they have become accustomed to the sumo world and have reached the high-ranking sekitori, they reflect back on their own tsukebito period saying, "It fostered my desire to get stronger," and, "When I first reached Juryo, I was really happy, and my ambition not to fall in rank became much stronger."

The reason the foreign rikishis are continuing their ambitious efforts on the dohyo is partially due to the fact that they are carefully selected talent being scouted in various countries, but one also gets the impression that their strong determination and ambition to become Yokozuna, which drives them enough to plunge into the unknown worlds of Japan and the sumo – may be stronger than that of their Japanese counterparts. I am repeatedly impressed by their earnestness.

Regulations set in 2002 limit each stable to one rikishi from abroad, and as a result only five spaces remain available for candidates now. There are lots of foreign wrestlers who want to enter professional sumo, and the traditional circles find themselves in the position of respecting the national sport of Japan while rushing to create a framework to accept foreign rikishis in a positive manner.

Why don't you come to watch sumo and cheer on these dedicated foreign rikishis?

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*Note : Unfortunately, however, he missed the last tournament because of appendicitis and was demoted to the rank of Makushita. He has to go back to the large room, and of course, he cannot use his own curtains for a while, thus sumo society is really severe.