

The World of Sumo

By *Hatakeyama Noboru*

Just after I entered primary school, I was not too healthy. I was frequently absent from school. Did I get bored at home? No way. I was busy watching Sumo magazines every day. I can remember every result of the great tournament held in the spring of 1943 of each wrestler who belonged to the upper division (*Maku-uchi*). I learned many *kanji* (Chinese characters) through reading Sumo magazines. I have been a crazy fan of this national sport for more than 60 years and will continue to be. It is said that the history of Sumo dates back to the seventh century when it was introduced into the Imperial Court ceremony. Any technique other than using tools could be used at that time, including kicking down the opponent. According to the Nihon Sumo Kyokai (Japan Sumo Association), *ju-jutsu* whose technique formed the basis of judo, now an Olympic sport, derived from Sumo. I think the rules of Sumo are the simplest of any sport. As many of you know, two almost naked players wearing silk loinclothes (*mawashi*) fight each other in a circle with a diameter of less than five meters. To win, you have to push your opponent out of the circle or make him fall down in the circle. Falling down means touching the ground with any part of one's body other than one's soles. Japan's professional Sumo league started in the Edo period (1603-1867).

Partly because of its simple rules, Sumo has become quite international nowadays in terms of its players and fans. There are currently 695 professional Sumo wrestlers, including those in the lower ranked divisions. In professional Sumo, there are six divisions, with the *Maku-uchi* division at the top and *Jonokuchi* at the bottom. Generally speaking, a new wrestler starts in the bottom division. If he has more wins than defeats in grand tournament that is held six times a year, then he will be promoted to a higher position, includ-

ing getting promoted to higher division. This system is similar to one used in professional American baseball. *Maku-uchi* is similar to the Major League and *Juryo*, one division below, resembles the 3A league. Of these 695 Sumo wrestlers, 53, or 7.6%, are non-Japanese. Since the ratio of foreigners living in Japan to the entire population is less than 2% at the most, the Sumo world, one of the most traditional in its way of life and culture is much more open than Japanese society in general. Of the 53 non-Japanese mentioned above, 35 are from Mongolia, four from Russia, three from China, two each from South Korea, Brazil and Tonga and one each from the other five countries. In *Maku-uchi*, there are 42 wrestlers headed by *Yokozuna* Asashoryu from Mongolia. Asashoryu is the 68th *Yokozuna* and the third non-Japanese to hold the title. The other two were Akebono and Musashimaru from Hawaii, who later adopted Japanese nationality. From Hawaii, there were two other famous wrestlers, Takamiyama and Konishiki. Whenever one of these Americans got the championship in a grand tournament, the President of the United States always sent a telegram to congratulate him. President Jacques Chirac of France is highly respected in Japan for his profound knowledge and interest in Japanese culture and tradition, including Sumo. It is often jokingly said in Japan that the French Embassy in Japan is always busy when a Sumo grand tournament is being held because it has to report the results to the Palais de l'Elysée every day. I hope this is true although I am afraid this might not be the case.

In the *Maku-uchi* division, there are 42 wrestlers. *Kokkai*, meaning "Black Sea," from Georgia, is the youngest at 22 years old. Asashoryu and another wrestler from Mongolia are both 23 years old. The fact that the three youngest wrestlers are all from other countries may reflect the aging of

Japanese society.

The other day, the Ambassador from Paraguay to Japan, Miguel A. Solano Lopez, kindly visited my office to say farewell to me. He had been in Japan for almost seven years, and was highly respected by the Japanese and foreign diplomats here in Tokyo. He is a keen fan of Sumo, and took a photograph of Kyokushuzan, another Mongolian Sumo wrestler, with his arm upon the shoulder of a high school student standing in line with him. This was five years ago and the high school boy has become Asashoryu. Last year, Asashoryu was criticized rather harshly for his bad manners in the tournament by those who think a *Yokozuna* should serve as a model of politeness, modesty and other virtues.

His impoliteness towards Kyokushuzan by grabbing his hair in the match and throwing *sagari* (loincloth strings) against him after the other match was blamed. Kyokushuzan was the pioneer among Mongolian Sumo wrestlers. However, Ambassador Lopez told me, the attitude of Asashoryu had greatly improved in the grand tournament held in January. Ambassador Lopez is an acute observer not only of Sumo per se but of the culture that goes with it.

With this international diversification of wrestlers and fans, Sumo might deserve to be picked up as an Olympic sport in the not so distant future. If this should happen, however, the gold medal for Sumo may be given to Mongolia rather than Japan.

COMING UP

The next issue of *Economy, Culture & History JAPAN SPOTLIGHT Bimonthly* will focus on Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). We will analyze the trend of economic integration which has been accelerating recently, especially in Asia.