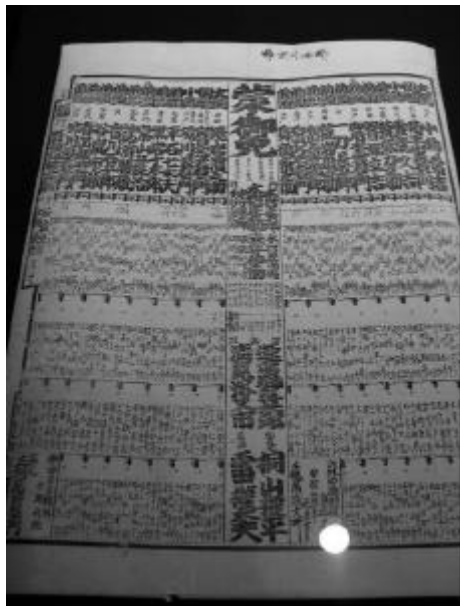


# What's in a banzuke?

by Chris Gould

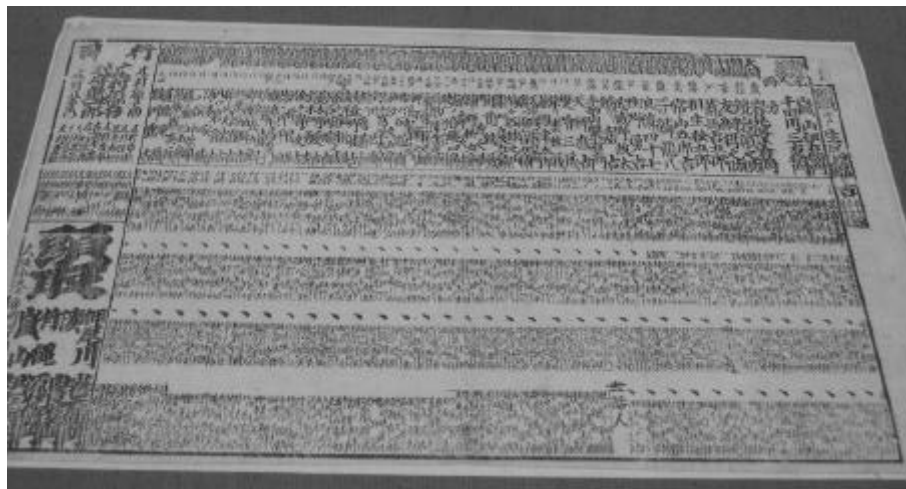
*We all know of it, but what lies behind and within it? In the 250th year since its initial publication in printed form, Chris Gould delves deeper into the history and secrets of the banzuke. (Banzuke translation by Itsumi Brown and Naoko Sukegawa).*

The banzuke is the codified form of sumo's unflinching respect for rank, a product of the history of the society surrounding it and a shining embodiment of the samurai values sumo wishes to preserve. A sumotori's earnings and status in the heya are both dependent on the banzuke position they achieve. Every heya has fixed a banzuke-progress board to its wall, in which wooden tiles bearing the names of the stable's wrestlers are rearranged between basho according to the ranks rikishi attain. The conferral of sekitori status or anything above forever encourages media



*1856 Edo Hatsu Basho Banzuke - Mark Buckton - Courtesy of Sumo Museum*

photo-shoots of wrestler and stable master with banzuke sheet, if possible smilingly fingering the position the sumotori has attained.



*1844 Osaka July Basho Banzuke - Mark Buckton - Courtesy of Sumo Museum*

And, of course, whenever a sumotori retires, his name is forever associated with the loftiest banzuke rank he achieved.

Present-day banzuke – frequently used as the equivalent of New Year greetings cards by members of the sumo association – are issued on 'oban' rice paper. They are presented in portrait form, unlike many banzuke produced by the defunct Osaka and Kyoto sumo associations which were mapped out horizontally. The banzuke informs fans of the taikyu (rank), shikona (ring name), and shushin (native prefecture) of every professional sumotori. First division wrestlers appear at the top of the banzuke in a large, bold script. The further down the ranking list one travels, the smaller this script becomes until it reaches microscopic proportions. So small are the characters used to record the information for the lowest-ranked wrestlers that they are nicknamed 'mushi megane' ('best seen through spectacles'). Gyoji, judges, sumo association directors and regular oyakata are also listed in the middle column of the banzuke, which is headlined with the kanji for 'gomen komuru,'

a reminder of when the Edo authorities granted licenses for sumo performances. Hopes for the blossoming of sumo 'for the next thousand years' are expressed in kanji at the banzuke's bottom-left.

Banzuke are commonly believed to have first appeared in the Genroku era (1688-1704), in the form of two wooden blocks, each bearing the names of sumotori and officials representing either the east or west. In the words of a 1989 sumo text: 'Banzuke, or ranking lists, began to appear regularly in Kyoto at the end of the 1600s, and in Edo around 1720... [T]he increasing popularity of professional sumo tournaments soon brought the need for printed banzuke.'<sup>i</sup>

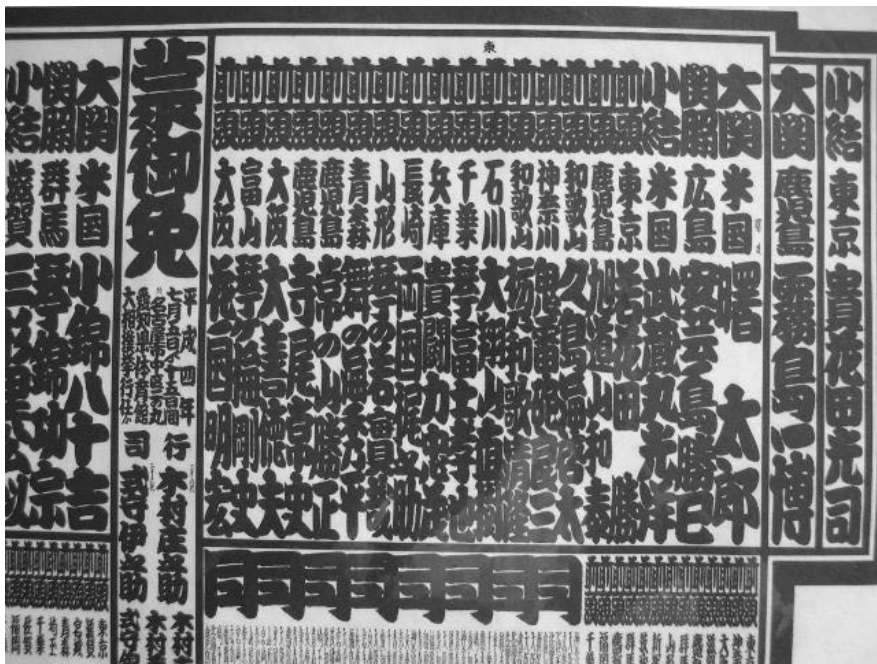
Although 19th century research claimed that printed banzuke date back to 1753, a subsequent consensus has emerged that the inaugural banzuke was published for the tournament of October 1757 by Mikawa Jiemon, otherwise known as the sumo elder Negishi. The style of calligraphy deployed – which mirrored that of Kabuki theatre advertisements – came to be known as Negishi-ryu. Negishi

and his descendants monopolised banzuke printing for the next 170 years, during which time Negishi-

listed on the inaugural banzuke; yokozuna did not appear in scripted form until 1890. Equally

20th century. The warlords and Yoshidas certainly favoured Tanikaze and Onogawa, who became the first rikishi on a printed banzuke to be awarded yokozuna licenses despite the little known fact that they sometimes dropped from ozeki to sekiwake. On the other hand, Raiden Tamemon, widely regarded as the strongest sumotori ever, was never elevated to yokozuna despite dominating the ozeki slots for over 15 years. Furthermore, one notices the frequency with which banzuke were topped by a hitherto unmentioned rikishi bounding straight in at ozeki; placed there, one suspects, on the whims of their powerful patrons.

The 1860s entertained two political eras in which only three makunouchi banzuke were produced: the Man'en period (1860-1) and the Genji period (1864-5). During the former, all three banzuke were headed by the famous Grand Champions Unryu Hisakichi (whose name is still erroneously attributed to a yokozuna dohyo-iri) and Sakaigawa Namiemon. The actual founder of the Unryu-gata, Shiranui Mitsuemom, was ranked komusubi/ sekiwake/ sekiwake during Man'en. Shiranui later joined Unryu atop the three Genji banzuke, the last of which marked

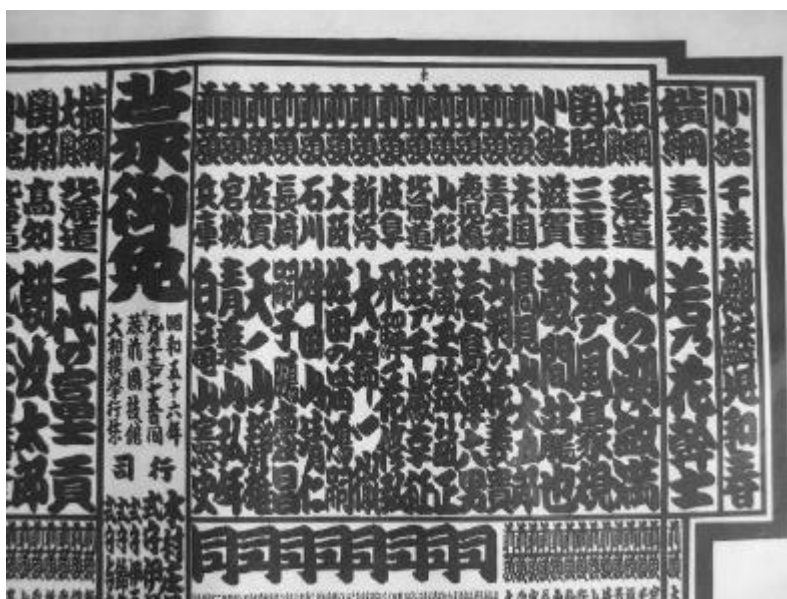


Note the lack of yokozuna - banzuke headed by ozeki – Mark Buckton

ryu evolved into the sumo-ji seen on the banzuke today. Senior gyoji assumed responsibility for banzuke production in 1926, and continue to do so in the present day, sometimes only finishing a ranking list after two whole weeks of elegant handwriting. The actual ranking of wrestlers is determined by the Banzuke Hensei Kaigi (Banzuke Decision Committee).

The inaugural banzuke of October 1757 is illuminating for two reasons. Firstly, every single rikishi on the western side is listed as hailing from Edo, which illustrates the fact that, before 1934, the banzuke interpreted 'shushin' as the area in which sumotori practiced and not where they were born. Secondly, none of the eastern-side rikishi are listed as 'Edo shushin.' This is because these rikishi were, in fact, a guest team, made up of disparate individuals from all over Japan: Kyushu, Osaka, Akita and northern Honshu. As remains custom in baseball today, this guest team was offered the eastern-side out of the Edo hosts' politesse. Ozeki is the highest rank

interesting is the fact that only seven maegashira are noted on each side of makunouchi, as opposed to 16 or 17 today. From the early banzuke, it is not difficult to distinguish those currying favour with the warlords who ruled sumo before professionalisation, and in particular with the Yoshida family, who held the rights to grant yokozuna licenses until the mid-



One for the history buffs – Mark Buckton

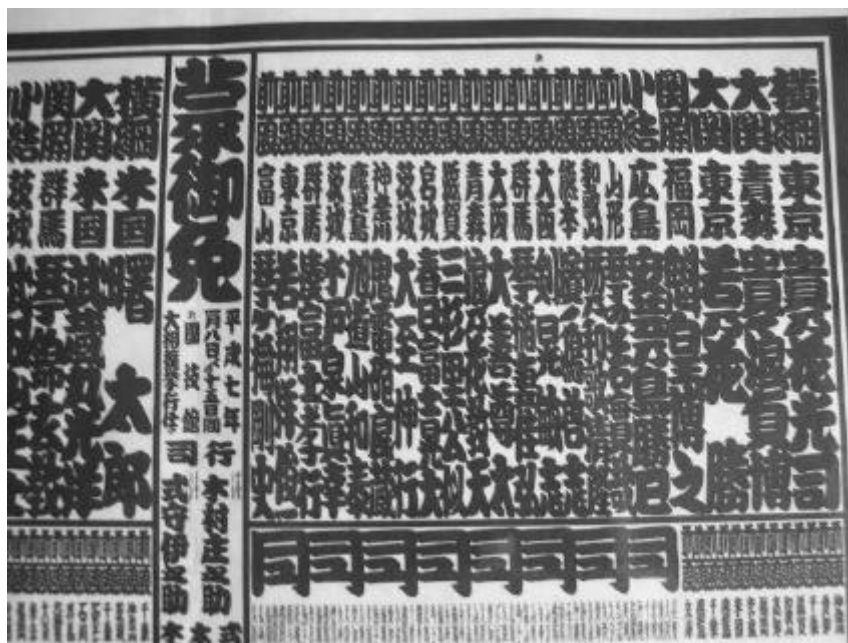
Unryu's final basho as an active rikishi. Both the Man'en and Genji banzuke reveal sumo's growing enthusiasm for obscenely large child rikishi performing special dohyo-iri during breaks in the action. Particularly interesting about the Genji banzuke, however, is that the dohyo-iri performer is not a child but a 19-year-old makunouchi debutant by the name of Minasegawa, whose height is somewhat implausibly given as 245 centimetres. (The sumo museum lists his height as an even more implausible 3 metres!)

In November 1866, after Unryu's retirement, Shiranui became the first 'yokozuna' to be transferred from west to east on the rankings chart, in order for Jinmaku to be elevated from ozeki east to yokozuna west. The mid-1860s also saw more appearances by extra haridashi komusubi and sekiwake, one of whom, Kimenzan, was promoted to the ozeki position alongside Shiranui at the top of the final banzuke printed before the Meiji restoration. Meiji's reformers took several months to formally change the name of Japan's capital, meaning that the banzuke of November 1868 still labelled the wrestlers Miyagino and Kuminiyama as 'Edo-shushin.' These two sumotori unsurprisingly became the first to be classified as 'Tokyo-shushin' in the following rankings chart of April 1869, along with makunouchi newcomer Onoe. Unsurprisingly, over the next ten years, numbers of 'Tokyo-shushin' sekitori steadily increased.

In December 1874, Maegashira 1E Takasago and Sekiwake West Koyanagi suffered the ignominy of having their names painted over on the banzuke. Their crime: daring to question the financial procedures of the Tokyo Sumo Association, and the integrity of the senior management. The two wrestlers were expelled from the Tokyo Sumo Association for their actions, but not before the

banzuke sheets for the December basho were printed, hence the resultant comic act of banzuke censorship. Takasago began his career as Takamiyama Daigoro, and it is doubtful if another name has had equivalent significance in makunouchi banzuke history. Not only is it associated with the infamous reformer, but it also spawned the first 'America shushin' sanyaku rikishi in the early 1970s when adopted by the Hawaiian Jesse Kuhaulua. Takamiyama Daigoro not only became the first 'America shushin' yusho-winner and sekiwake, but also the first non-Japanese-born stable master in 1986.

east and west sides of its match day programmes. In May 1896, for instance, the newly-promoted Konishiki Yasokichi (after whom a certain gigantic Hawaiian was later named) was offered the title yokozuna-ozeki, so that the sole ozeki, Otohira, could share the top rank with him and balance the banzuke out with the help of two haridashi sekiwake. The following year, balance was achieved by casting Ho as haridashi ozeki and Asashio as haridashi sekiwake. The year after that, Konishiki kept the top rank for himself with two ozeki beneath him, and Ozutsu was deployed as a haridashi sekiwake for harmony's sake. And



Americans one side, Japanese the other –  
Mark Buckton

The kanji for 'yokozuna' first graced the banzuke in May 1890. Nishinoumi Kajiro was the earliest sumotori to have the title officially recognised in writing, after allegedly complaining that a billing of 'haridashi ozeki' would confine him to the far-side of the banzuke. Nishinoumi's shikona was still written in haridashi ozeki form, though, as was that of Tsurugizan, who balanced out the banzuke as the haridashi ozeki who was not a yokozuna. Over the years, the Tokyo Sumo Association would find many different ways of equilibrating the

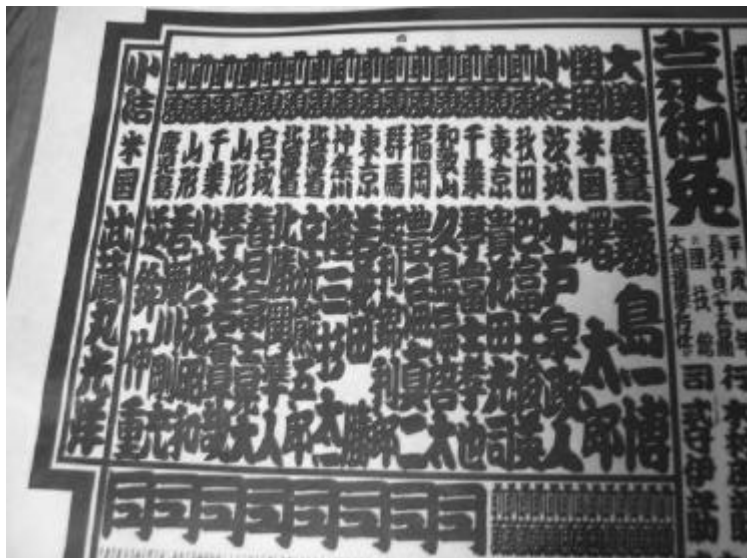
In 1904, with 'Ume-Hitachi' fever beginning to bite, Ozutsu Man'emon became the first ever haridashi yokozuna ahead of ozeki-yokozuna Umegatani and yokozuna west Hitachiyama. Unusually, the banzuke was bereft of standard ozeki and jumped from Ume-Hitachi to the sekiwake.

The most remarkable feature of early 1900s programmes is the sumo association's extreme determination never to place Umegatani and Hitachiyama on the same side of the banzuke.

Every time one crosses from east to west, the other traverses in the opposite direction – at least until another fine yokozuna, Tachiyama came along. At a time when sumo's popularity was finally expanding after forty turbulent years – to the point where

Finally, in May 1924, a more complicated balancing act was carried out. Tochigiya was appointed haridashi yokozuna east, Nishinoumi III nestled in the yokozuna west position and Tsunenohana became yokozuna-ozeki east, thereby sharing a

differences to merge in early 1927, Miyagiyama Fukumatsu became the first Osaka yokozuna to grace a Tokyo banzuke. However, his retirement in 1931 left the sumo association without a yokozuna atop the ranking list for the first time since the rank was accorded independent status in 1890. Thus, in May and October 1931, the second-rankers Onosato and Tamanishiki led the listings, with the haridashi ozeki beneath them, Noshirogata, being balanced out by a haridashi komusubi, Yamanishiki.



*When Akebono outranked the Hanadas – Mark Buckton*

The following year, disaster struck the new Japan Sumo Association (NSK) as 29 wrestlers listed on the January 1932 banzuke failed to show up for the Hatsu basho, embroiled as they were in strike action against their employers over pay and conditions. When outside mediation failed, and the sekiwake Tenryu became convinced that he and his rebels could stage a breakaway tournament, the sumo association issued a drastically abbreviated makunouchi banzuke for February-March 1932, with just 20 names upon it. Among those 20, though, was Futabayama Sadaji, primed to make the most of his premature top-division debut and finish his career as one of sumo's most successful wrestlers ever, with a still-unsurpassed winning streak of 69 matches.

160,000 banzuke were needed for individual tournaments – the sumo association was loath to risk disappointing spectators by depriving them of match-ups between their two fine Grand Champions. Furthermore, as the east and west sections of the banzuke were competing with each other for a 'team trophy,' it would have been unfair to allocate the two strongest wrestlers to the same camp.

second-rung platform with the tournament's sole ozeki, Tachihikari of the west. Kiyosegawa was then shifted into the haridashi komusubi position to add weight to the west camp. Significantly, though, Tochigiya's haridashi status in this particular basho denoted – for the first time ever and on debatable evidence – his 'superior' status to the other two Grand Champions.

When twelve of Tenryu's rebels renegotiated entry into the NSK, a special banzuke, bearing their names only, was printed as a supplementary list for the January 1933 basho.

Shortly after the retirement of Umegatani and Hitachiyama, the first four-yokozuna banzuke was printed, headed by Tachiyama, Onishiki, Nishinoumi II and Otori, the latter two assuming haridashi status. The sumo association continued to experiment with novel ways of balancing out the highest ranks, by weighing two haridashi east yokozuna, and then a solitary yokozuna, against a pair of haridashi west ozeki (May 1918 and January 1919 respectively). Two years later, a haridashi sekiwake was deemed sufficient to counteract the two west yokozuna.

While a series of banzuke balancing acts were tried and tested, the sumo elders embarked upon a more fundamental reform for the March 1922 tournament. The elders decreed that sumotori would be allocated to east or west according to whether they were born in east or west Japan. Short-lived though the experiment was, it paved the way for 'shushin' to denote a rikishi's place-of-birth rather than place-of-practice from 1934 onwards.

In 1936, the sumo stone of strength was erected on the site of the old Kokugikan in Ryogoku, to mark the outright supremacy of the Japan Sumo Association as Tenryu's rebel movement neared disintegration. Pillars surrounding the stone carry the names of wrestlers on the banzuke at that time, with Futabayama being

After the Tokyo and Osaka sumo associations laid aside years of

listed as a sekiwake. From laughably low numbers in 1932, the makunouchi division grew rapidly throughout the remainder of the decade. By 1941, Maegashira 21s – initially in the form of Otoigawa and Yakatayama – were appearing on the banzuke as never before. Maegashira 18s remained visible long after the war, with a future Grand Champion, Wakanohana Kanji, debuting at his rank in January 1950.

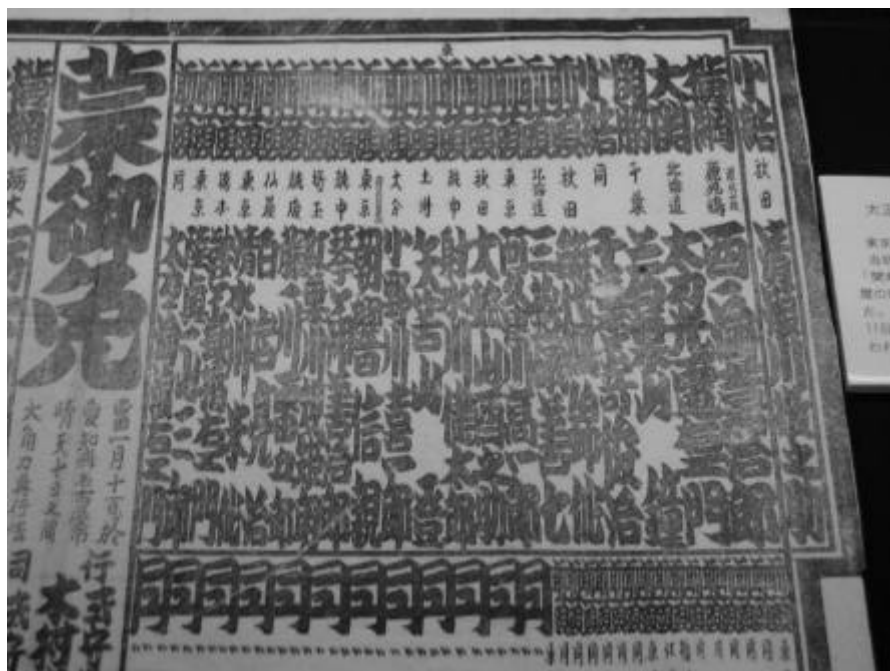
The practice of formally partitioning east and west into separate teams, and permitting sumotori from the same stable to face each other, was originally abolished in 1930, in theory to allow a wider variety of match-ups between rikishi. However, by 1939, the NSK was rehearsing many arguments that have since been replayed, most notably that one stable – Dewanoumi – had grown too vast and precluded several rikishi from meeting one another. The formal east-west division was thus reinstated until 1947, since when rikishi have freely crisscrossed the banzuke according to individual performance alone. The eastern side is still more revered though; whenever two rikishi hold the same rank (e.g. maegashira 1), the wrestler on the eastern side is nigh-always the one who has performed better in the previous tournament.

In March 1950, the ailing yokozuna Chiyonoyama pitted himself against the might of banzuke precedent by sensationally requesting to be demoted to ozeki. Although greats such as Tanikaze had suffered demotion to sekiwake while commanding honorary 'yokozuna' status, the sumo association still ruled that there was 'no precedent' for such a demotion and flatly refused Chiyonoyama's request. Their decision was taken on the principle that the title of yokozuna can never be relinquished.

Tanikaze held the title in 'honorary' form; he was only allowed to be demoted because he was officially an ozeki, and retained his yokozuna title despite relegation. However, since the rank of 'yokozuna' had been formalised on the banzuke in 1890, demotion was not an option for 1950s rikishi like Chiyonoyama, as this would entail a relinquishing of the rank and title. Chiyonoyama thus battled on as a sub-standard Grand Champion, and his retirement in

maegashira 13W in January 1960; and Sadanoyama as a maegashira 12E one year later.

July 1992 saw the banzuke headed by two foreign rikishi for the very first time. The quickfire retirements of the two remaining Japanese yokozuna, Asahifuji and Hokutoumi, left giant Hawaiians Akebono and Konishiki atop the banzuke in the rank of ozeki; a situation which antagonised the jingoistic elements of the sumo faithful. After Takanohana II's



*Exhibit at the sumo museum during the Aki Bashi - not many of these men left alive - Mark Buckton - Courtesy of Sumo Museum*

1951 contributed to the end of Yoshida domination over yokozuna licenses. Since 1951, the Yokozuna Deliberation Committee, drawn from members of the public, has assumed the lead role in assessing yokozuna candidates, with the NSK executives issuing the final rubber-stamp.

The first official Kyushu Bashi banzuke was published in November 1957; the first Nagoya banzuke under NSK auspices was circulated in July of the following year. Notable makunouchi debuts in this period included that of Togashi (later Kashiwado) in September 1958; Taiho, as a

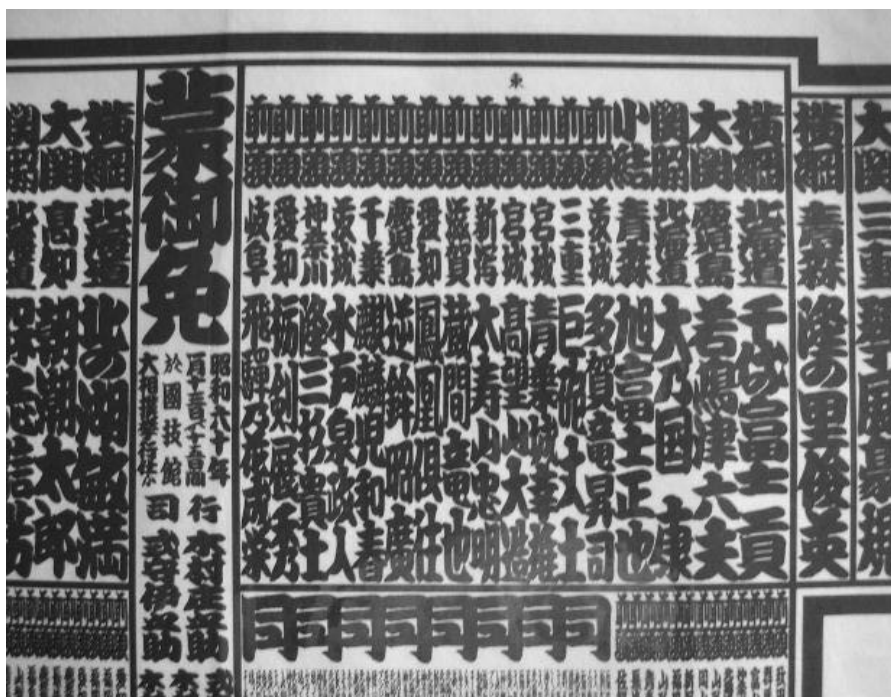
retirement in January 2003, the rankings chart was headed for a second time by two foreigners: Asashoryu and Musashimaru. Two-and-a-half years after the latter retired, in July 2006, the YDC made steps to place two foreigners atop the banzuke for a third time by recommending that the Mongolian ozeki Hakuho be promoted to the highest rank. However, according to the recently-departed chair of the YDC, the recommendation was over-ruled by NSK executives.

There was a time when the banzuke became so nationally treasured that it was used to classify aspects of everyday

Japanese life. As J. Svinth recalls in his 1919 translation of Hans Tittle's German text, *Sumo: The Japanese Wrestling*: 'the Japanese

use the same format to describe other things, partly in jest and partly as a mnemonic aid. For example, a memorandum for

farmers and their children listing harmful and useful insects began with the useful insects – bees, for instance – taking the place of the yokozuna on the west. One saw a similar arrangement in newspaper comparisons of the fleets involved in the World War. It even happens that pious Buddhists who are fans of sumo list their pious deeds in a wrestling format, using special signs to mark them. For example a great transgression is logged as "ozeki west," a little good deed as "maegashira east." Although in 2007 the banzuke is less influential in Japanese public life, and younger Japanese even struggle to decipher the sumo-ji, it nevertheless retains a special charm and prestige in the eyes of all who are regularly acquainted with it.



*Yokozuna and ozeki everywhere –  
Mark Buckton*

<sup>i</sup> Adams/ Newton, *Sumo*, (London, Hamlyn, 1989)