

SFM Interview

Risa X....., Angel Of The Kokugikan

by Mark Buckton

As any recent, first time visitor to the Ryogoku Kokugikan will be aware, the NSK now employ a small team of helpers to guide those lost and perhaps confused to their seats in the octagonal stadium. Most seem to be women, some might speak a smattering of English, but amongst their ranks, just one stands out as a bilingual angel – capable of answering questions in Japanese and / or English.

Speaking recently to SFM's Mark Buckton (MB), Risa (R), as we will call her, gives us a brief insight into her life as one of the few to whom so much is owed by so many Kokugikan newbies.

MB: Risa, please tell us a little about yourself?

R: My name is Risa, and I originally hail from Gunma Prefecture. By day I work as a receptionist and previously studied English in Canada – for 2 years. I love music and going to concerts, but although I am not a sporty person, I do now like watching sumo matches. My favorite wrestler is Takamisakari.

MB: You work as a guide at the Kokugikan during honbasho, but how did you get that job?

R: I got it through a friend. She also works as a guide at the Kokugikan.

MB: How long have you been doing the job?

R: Since the Hatsu Basho last year

- 2007. So, thus far, four basho in total.

MB: Do you enjoy the work?

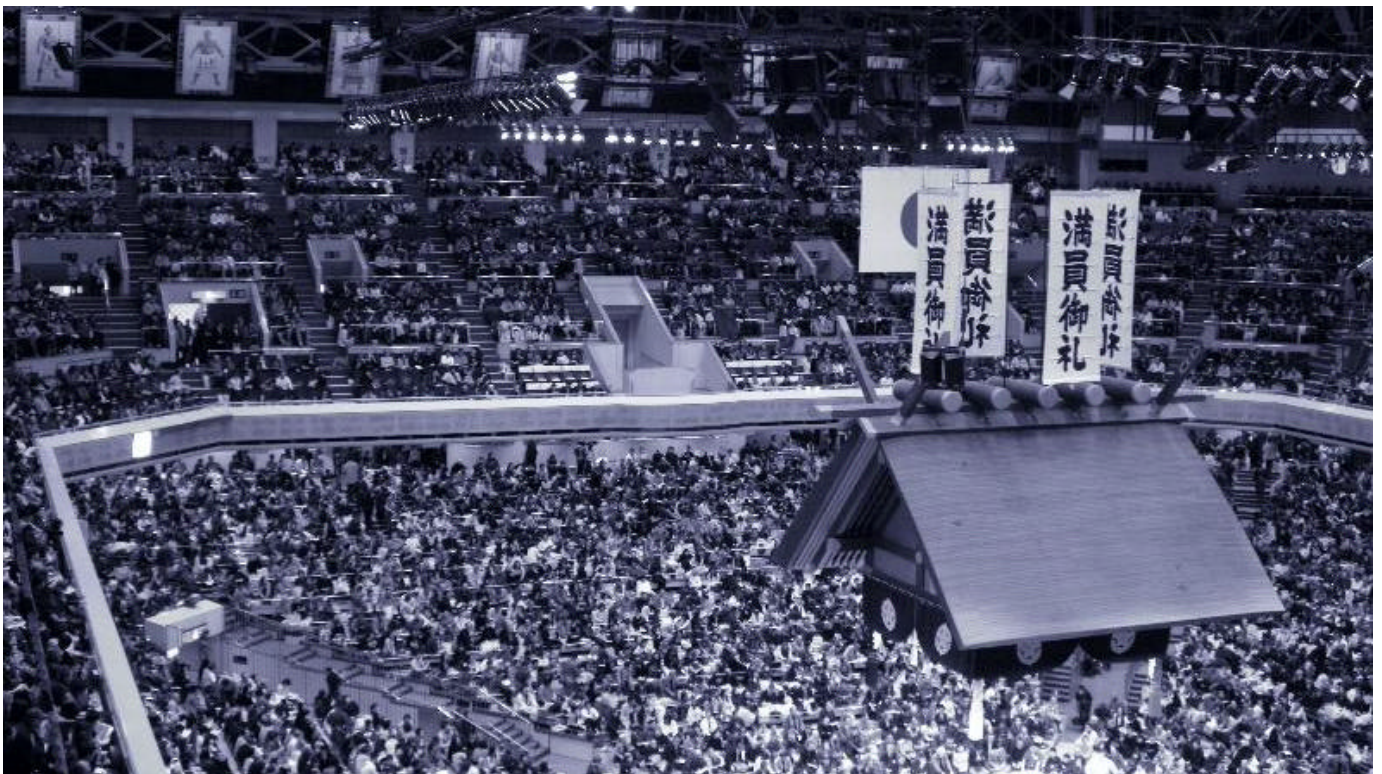
R: Yes, I really enjoy the work as I love meeting people from different countries.

MB: You are bi-lingual of course, but is this a help or a hindrance in the job?

R: I think (being bilingual) helps me a lot.

MB: Have you had any funny episodes with foreign visitors to the Kokugikan?

R: I have met some 'sumo otaku' from various countries, and have made friends with some people.



After the bouts end, we sometimes go to an izakaya and perhaps karaoke.

MB: I know you work closely with several former rikishi now employed by the Nihon Sumo Kyokai – and favorites amongst them?

R: No favorites as they are all very nice people. They are like ‘walking sumo encyclopedia.’

MB: Before taking the job, were you a fan of sumo?

R: No, not at all, but I am now. I really like watching Takamisakari.

MB: In your own time as a guide, have you seen the number of non-Japanese visitors to the Kokugikan rise?

R: I am always surprised that more and more foreign visitors come each basho, but they arrive at the stadium very early in the morning to get a day ticket, and miss the last couple of main matches at the end of the day because they get bored and leave

early.

MB: What about the overall number of people attending – up or down?

R: Definitely, up.

MB: As you know, Asashoryu was ‘absent’ last year for a few months, but after his return, ticket sales have apparently increased. Do you see Asa as good or bad for sumo?

R: I think he is good for sumo because he has a solid fan base here and attracts attention to the sport.

MB: The Kokugikan is actually one of the most modern and structurally sound buildings in Tokyo. Do you have a chance to learn about the building itself?

R: Not yet, but I would love to learn more about it.

MB: Any funny inside stories you can share with us about the work as a guide at the Kokugikan?

R: Once, I tried to introduce a

foreign Japanese speaking friend to the company who hire the guides but they told me that a guide should be a Japanese person (in order) to maintain the ‘image’ of sumo even though many rikishi are non-Japanese nowadays.

MB: How many guides are there on a Saturday or Sunday / weekday?

R: Around 10-12 in total now.

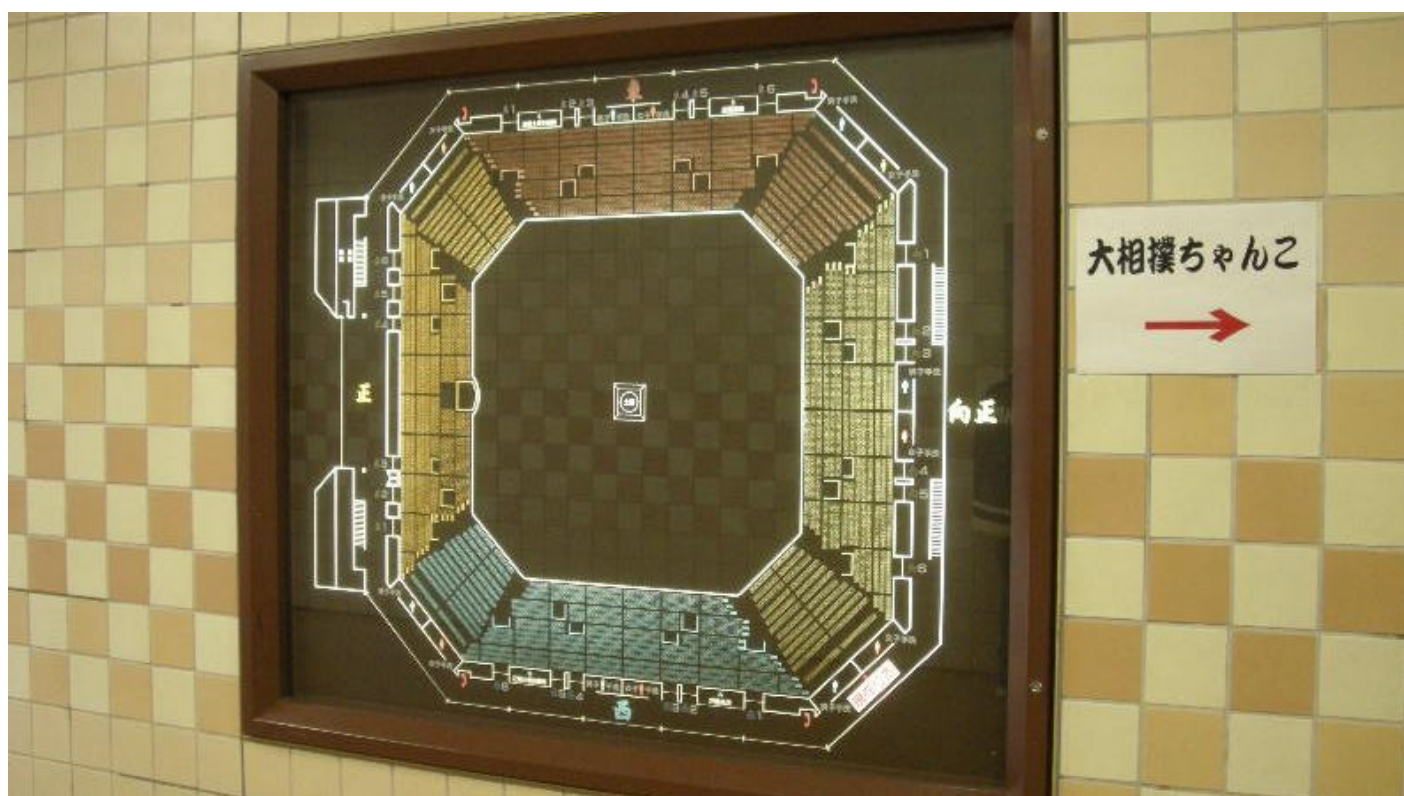
MB: Do any young men do the job or are all guides women?

R: They are mostly women.

MB: Have you seen any famous visitors to the Kokugikan – those coming in privately?

R: I have seen some celebrities come in. Of note, I recall the Japanese Imperial Family and the former yokozuna Wakanohana III.

MB: Oddly, should foreign people ask the NSK to make announcements about lost friends or folk with tickets being inside as their friends wait outside, these



announcements are only made in Japanese – useful or useless?

R: I don't know about making announcements inside the stadium but we should at least put a message board in English at the information center.

MB: Is this a job you would like to continue for a long time?

R: Yes, I would love to continue doing this as long as possible.

MB: Are you, as a young Japanese woman, surprised by the level of interest in sumo among foreign tourists and longer term residents?

R: Yes, but I am very glad to meet people who have an interest in my own culture.

MB: Have any of the former rikishi you work with expressed surprise at the large numbers of non-Japanese in sumo?

R: They are all surprised about it, and some people today say that

sumo is becoming more like the Mongolian (sumo) than the original Japanese form of the sport.

MB: Do you enjoy watching any other sports – baseball, football etc?

R: I like watching hockey games from the NHL (National Hockey League).

MB: How old were you when you first saw sumo?

R: I don't really remember but I was probably 5-years-old or so, and of course saw it on TV first.

MB: Is it a sport you would like to try? (women do do sumo nowadays)

R: No, not really. I am more into watching it.

MB: Sumo on an amateur level is trying to get into the Olympics. What would regular Japanese think about this idea in your opinion?

R: Compared to other traditional Japanese sports such as judo and karate, sumo is not as popular a sport and (I don't think) that people would like to try.

MB: If I ask to borrow your uniform so I can get into the stadium without buying a ticket, what would you say?

R: That is a great idea but you should wear a black wig too!

MB: Risa, you are a friend of our own Chris Gould – can you tell us something funny about Chris that he might not share himself? (I promise we won't show him before this is printed in SFM)

R: I first met Chris at the Hatsu Basho in 2007 and was impressed with his Japanese which he told me is self taught. He is a sumo otaku, too, and I am glad that he will come here to Japan to work and explore the culture more. I am sure that he will write many more great articles for SFM.