

Heya Peek Shitaku-beya

by Chris Gould

On May 3rd and 4th 2008, the Japan Sumo Association held two Kokugikan Open Days in another bid to entice more fans to the sumo hall. Among the attractions on offer was a tour of the shitaku-beya, the revered dressing rooms in which every professional sumoist prepares for a Kokugikan match.

The rains fell as the Kokugikan opened itself up to dwellers at a local Ryogoku festival, and yet the atmosphere was not dampened in the slightest. On the Kokugikan forecourt, junior wrestlers and other able chefs posed for photographs while gleefully churning out hoards of chanko servings to delighted customers. The Kokugikan foyer, meanwhile, teemed with trestle tables besieged with sumo information, including – most interestingly – tournament ‘Who’s Who’ booklets dating back 25 years. On the opposite side of the foyer stood the table of juryo giant Kitazakura, proudly showcasing the veteran crowd pleaser’s selection of self-made bead jewellery. But, the real prize lay a short distance from the Sumo Museum: a guided tour of the Kokugikan basement and, in particular, the shitaku-beya (dressing rooms).

On any given match day, a rikishi will represent either the ‘east’ or ‘west’ side of the dohyo. So that opponents do not meet before their match-ups, each sumo arena unsurprisingly has two dressing rooms: one for ‘east side’ wrestlers and another for ‘west side’ wrestlers. Each shitaku-beya is directly connected to the dohyo by a hanamichi (‘flower path’) corridor, the name of which is

derived from a time when two teams of ‘east’ and ‘west’ wrestlers were represented by different flowers. Until the 1980s, especially at the Kuramae Kokugikan, it was commonplace for fans (and especially little children) to line the hanamichi, photograph and pat their heroes on the back. Unfortunately for supporters, though, the practice has since been banned as wrestlers allegedly complained about having their concentration disturbed before important matches.

Each shitaku-beya itself is a large rectangular room of perhaps 30 metres by 6 or 7 metres. Three of the four walls are lined with raised wooden platforms, upon which wrestlers may sit and stretch their legs while awaiting their torikumi. The fourth side of the room leads to rikishi shower and toilet facilities – the latter being considerably larger and wider than those for the average Japanese! A rikishi’s seat in the shitaku-beya depends purely and simply on the banzuke position he holds for the current tournament. The highest rankers, the yokozuna, sit furthest from the shitaku-beya door (in line with Japanese custom). Their perch, right in the middle of the raised platform adjoining the far wall, allows them a panoramic view of the entire dressing room, and a prime view of the two television screens hanging from the ceiling. The lowest ranked wrestlers in makuuchi will sit nearest the door, and thus be unable to see the overhanging television screens at all.

At their busiest times, especially prior to the juryo and makuuchi dohyo-iri, shitaku-beya can be

graced by 100 people, as wrestlers, attendants and tokoyama (hairdressers) frantically focus on match day preparations. Effervescence abounds as wrestlers slap teppo poles, perform shiko stamps, practice tachi-ai, have their mage tied and adjust their kesho-mawashi and mawashi. The latter products are contained in large 15-kilogram boxes called [akeni](#), diligently carried to the shitaku-beya by tsukebito.

It is said, in sumo circles, that some rikishi are so nervous before torikumi as to become virtually numb to their dressing room surroundings. When returning from the ring victorious or defeated, wrestlers allegedly often comment on how different the dressing room seems, and on how much more human they feel as the efforts of their mid-bout exertions catch up with them.

The shitaku-beya is rightly seen as the home of ‘sumo behind the scenes;’ the place where even the greatest wrestlers let down their guard a little. It is for this reason that NHK television invests time and money in ‘shitaku-beya updates,’ which see excited reporters inform viewers as to the condition of certain wrestlers before important matches. Few such reports were more eagerly-awaited than that of senshuraku in the May 2001 tournament, when a nation wondered whether Takanohana would even turn up for his title-deciding bout against Musashimaru due to a crippled knee. Occasionally, tempers have boiled over in the dressing rooms, leading to spectacular results. Makushita man Kotokanyu was

forced to resign from the sumo association in September 2006, after punching a fellow wrestler in the shitaku-beya. Most recently, in May 2008, Russian giant Wakanoho allegedly trashed much of his dressing room after unluckily losing to Ama's incredible pivot-throw. Most famously, during the 2003 Nagoya basho, Mongolians Asashoryu and

Kyokushuzan reportedly almost came to blows in the shitaku-beya shower rooms after the latter accused the former of 'not respecting his elders.'

Overall, though, the shitaku-beya is a source of positive sumo interaction, not least for star-struck younger wrestlers. 'In the shitaku-beya on senshuraku,

young tsukebito like me can get close to the yokozuna,' one wrestler gushed recently. 'For example, I have been there several times when Asashoryu has walked past for a yusho-win photo-shoot. He always says "good luck" to me, which is a real confidence-booster.'



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