

A Desire for Internationally-minded Oyakata to Train Foreign-born Rikishi

by Michiko Kodama

I hope you will lead the vanguard and grapple with issues of resuscitating the way of sumo". These words were uttered by the then Minister of MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) to the new chairman of Nihon Sumo Kyokai, Musashigawa, when he visited the Ministry late in the afternoon of September 8th to report his inauguration. When I heard the expression, the word 'resuscitate' shocked me to a certain extent, even though for a moment I saw hidden empathy in the word. According to the dictionary, 'resuscitate' is "to make somebody start breathing again or become conscious (once) again after they have almost died." The cabinet member's comment, therefore, meant that sumo had already died a literal death.

September 8th was the day ex-rikishi Wakanoho, arrested on August 18th for illegal possession of cannabis and dismissed from the NSK shortly afterwards, was released without punishment. At that time too, just a week had passed since the Russian brothers, Roho and Hakurozan were tested positive for marijuana and summarily discharged from the NSK. Thus, I may safely say that when the Minister spoke the words above, the incident foremost in his mind was probably the terrible drug scandals to which the three foreigners had been connected.

In recent years many serious scandals have been created in the world of Ozumo. However, the marijuana incident gave (Japanese) society such a shock that it was thereafter associated

with the death of the sport. This is because Japan is a country very strict in its rules when it comes to drugs. Even Paul McCartney of the Beatles was once banned from entering this country because he possessed drugs. Laws and controls surrounding drug use are different in each country, so the dismissal by the NSK may seem too strict to those people whose nations are relatively tolerant towards marijuana.

As a Japanese who likes sumo, what I wondered about the three Russians was as follows: whether they did not know the severity of Japan as pertains to drug possession; how much pride and self-awareness they had as high-ranking rikishi; and how much they truly understood that Japanese sumo is not a mere sport but an activity based on cultural, ritual aspects with a lengthy history. If they had really been conscious of any of the above, they would not have caused such sad incidents. However, what's done is done – what is more important now is the need to think out effectual steps for reviving our traditional sport.

At the outset, I would like to begin by thinking why each stable master or the NSK itself could not educate the three foreign-born wrestlers properly before they made such awful mistakes. Generally speaking, in the world of Ozumo, foreign rikishi who have a stronger physique rise more rapidly than Japanese wrestlers and some of them go up to juryo very soon after entering – thereby conferred the title of 'sekitori'. After becoming sekitori they are

not usually instructed on what they should do or how they should behave, because sekitori are premised on an assumption that they have already mentally mastered the way of sumo throughout their hard training, and as a result they are allowed to act at their own discretion. This means that foreign-born sekitori with limited time as low-ranking rikishi do not have the opportunities afforded to others to master these issues through experiencing the essence of the way of sumo. As for the three ex-sekitori, they are not an exception. I think this is especially the case with the youngest rikishi – Wakanoho – a sumotori since just 2005. The NSK should have prepared special training for foreign boys for, the drug issue aside, the scandals in which foreign rikishi were involved were partially due to a lack of preparation in educating them.

The first foreign sekitori who comes to my mind as a rapid success is Konishiki. During his era of success, Japanese society had not had enough experience in seeing so many Japanese rikishi beaten so easily by a non-Japanese wrestler. As a result, for the sole reason that Konishiki was stronger than Japanese, he was unreasonably criticized. His words were misinterpreted due to language problems, and were sometimes twisted. He was likened to the strong black-coloured foreign ships which came to Japan in the Edo-period (1603-1867) and urged that we should open this country to the West, and so was blamed for being a 'Black Ship Invasion'. As a result of this

unjust Konishiki-bashing, he had to train himself mentally, willy-nilly.

Yet, today there is no need to worry about foreign rikishi-bashing; Japanese society seems to have learnt to welcome strong foreigners since committing such a terrible sin in bashing Konishiki. In fact, at present, one-third of the makunouchi slots are occupied by foreigners, and they are now indispensable in the world of Japanese sumo. Many of them win hearty applause during the 'dohyo-iri' during tournaments. As a matter of course, stable masters try to teach them sumo techniques; and so, important mental education may be given a lower priority even when really needed.

Actually, oyakata have never disregarded the education of foreign-born rikishi. In May, 1992, the Shisho-kai decided to place restrictions on foreigners joining sumo, probably because they thought they could not teach them how to behave properly if they received too many at the same time. In 1998, though, they resumed inviting non-Japanese with the common understanding in place that they serve a trial period in each stable until they master the Japanese language. This promise was gradually ignored though. From February, 2002, there was an agreement in place that centered on each stable limiting its foreign-based intake to one rikishi, but this principle is also not followed that rigidly. I personally think this rule should

be followed as strictly as possible, except in unavoidable circumstances. Although it may impose restrictions on foreign people who try to join the world of Japanese sumo, the careless welcome of all-comers should be suspended until the NSK prepares effective training steps.

So, in concrete terms, what kinds of steps can be thought out to make life easier for the new foreign rikishi we will see in future? According to a newspaper article, the classroom-based lessons on subjects such as the history of sumo, which all new disciples have to take for six months, are difficult even for Japanese rikishi; and foreigners may view them as complete gibberish. The need for interpreters is therefore obvious. Removing their initial language barrier will surely help them to adapt themselves to Japanese society faster; after which, gradually they should be taught about the way of sumo, the meanings of the traditional Japanese sport. It will not be easy to teach them the customs peculiar to Japanese sumo because many of the foreign rikishi were probably brought up learning how to assert themselves when need be. However, they must be taught to follow the rules of sumo and those of Japan – keeping their own (important) identity(ies) and pride for their own country locked away in their mind.

It is also necessary for stable masters to try to learn about the country from which their disciple

comes. To know about the country their deshi calls 'home,' its place in international society, its economical and political situation, its way of thinking, culture, food, etc., would be unquestionably helpful to establishing a deep relationship of trust with their foreign-born juniors. I believe the trust between oyakata and deshi is one of the most important things in the world of Japanese sumo. It is often said that in the sumo stable they live as one family. An oyakata should thus conduct a thorough background check on any country from which he adopts a child.

As Seneca said, "to be loved, you must love in advance", if stable masters want their foreign disciple to be a sumo-spirited rikishi, they themselves have to become an internationally-minded oyakata in advance.

On the last day of the Autumn Grand Sumo Tournament, after receiving the Emperor's Cup, Hakuho said that he would try to develop the way of sumo. I am not sure whether he was conscious of the Minister's words I quoted at the beginning of this piece, but I was touched by the attitude of the non-Japanese yokozuna who will try to maintain the traditions of the sport and to wipe away the blot left behind by three non-Japanese rikishi on Ozumo's history. Only when the NSK produces more foreign-born rikishi possessing the true sumo spirit can traditional Japanese sumo be an international sport in the truest sense.