

「Sumo」

I. Sonjuku visit to a Sumo beya

On May 6, Shimada sonjuku members and myself visited a Sumo Heya, named Oguruma-beya, to watch morning training of Sumo wrestlers and learn about their daily lives and what the Sumo community is about.

Sumo is Japan's very popular sport. This looks like a type of wrestling which is very traditional. The official Sumo tournament is held six times a year, each lasts 15 days. Each of the Sumo wrestlers fight 15 days against different wrestling match. Of the six tournaments, three times are held in Tokyo and others in other major cities like Osaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka.

On each day of each tournament, some several thousands of audience gather at the Sumo hall to watch the game. This implies that Sumo brings together some half a million Sumo fans to the hall. The tournament is fully televised nationally every day so that by the national broadcasting network so that at least 10 million people watch every day. You can imagine how popular Sumo is among Japanese people.

Moreover, while Sumo is undoubtedly the most traditional Japanese sport, it is perhaps the most internationalized sport in Japan. Of total listed Sumo players, more than a third are from foreign countries such as Mongol, Bulgaria, the US, Russia, Egypt etc. Many of them occupy high rank positions of the hierarchy of Sumo wrestlers stratified by winning records. The Sumo and Sumo wrestlers seen in these tournaments are thus pretty well known by the Japanese population. Sumo is pretty much the household word and Sumo players are household figures just like pop singers or baseball players.

The sonjuku members visited this time not such a popular tournament game but Sumo "Heya." It is pronounced "Sumo Beya" when the two words are combined. The "Heya" may be translated literally the stable of Sumo wrestlers where they live together and train hard by wrestling among themselves under the supervision and teaching of "Oyakata" or the stable master. Oyakata is the official position and title authorized by the Sumo association. Oyakata position can be obtained by high rank Sumo wrestlers after their retirement as active wrestler.

Oyakata usually recruits young promising boys collected from various regions of Japan as well as from foreign countries. Oyakata provides housing, food, clothing and above all teaching and training trying to foster them to be high rank Sumo wrestlers. In this sense the stable is more like home of the family. Oyakata plays the role of father and his wife the mother of the big family of wrestlers.

The stable is often named after the professional name of Oyakata, or sometimes Oyakata chooses his professional name when he succeeds a famous and traditional stable. We visited Oguruma-beya. Oguruma is the name of a traditional stable which existed up to half a century ago. When the Oyakata decided to become Oyakata, he revived the tradition of the old Oguruma-beya and took the name of "Oguruma" as the title of himself while his professional name during active wrestler is "Kotokaze," which literally means "wind which plays Japanese traditional music instrument like harp." He currently names himself, Mr.Koichi Oguruma.

When I asked Oguruma Oyakata as to whether he would be willing to show a part of daily life of his Sumo wrestlers to the sonjuku members, he gladly accepted our request saying "I'd love to if it helps to provide an opportunity for young Sonjuku entrepreneurs to learn about a part of Japanese traditional culture." We visited the Sumo-beya in stead of tournament games rightly for this purpose, that is to learn Japanese traditional culture.

II. Why Sumo?

Sumo is Japanese very traditional and also very popular sport. This is a Japanese national sport which has a history at least of several hundred years, and has been considered a holly and divine sport unlike many other popular sports.

The origin of Sumo goes back to ancient era of more than a thousand years ago when Sumo was considered as a kind of ritual to worship and pay respect to the god of Japanese traditional Shinto religion.

In Shinto religion it is believed that gods created Japanese archipelago. Unlike Jewish religion, Christianity or Islam religion which teaches that there

exists only one god in the universe who created the entire world, Shinto religion admits that there are as many gods as the kinds of objects we recognize.

People built many shrines in villages and communities where they worship these gods and holly spirits. They believed that the gods dictate climate, weather, harvesting, well-being, good and bad lucks of people. People worshiped at shrines hoping the gods provide good lucks and well being. Sumo is used as one of the rituals to pray for such benefits. It is in this sense that Sumo has been regarded as divine and holly sport.

As time went on to the era of Samurai, the warriors, the samurai lords liked to keep powerful Sumo wrestlers in their castle as a kind of status symbol as well as using them at a holly events or celebrations. In Edo era of long peace under the rigid feudal system governed by Tokugawa Shogunate, Sumo developed to become more like the current way of being. In addition to keeping its divine nature, it is used as a competitive game seeking for a prize. This practice of giving prize for the winner is to the current Sumo tournament. Counting from the time of Edo era when Sumo became more like the current way of being, we must recognize that Sumo has had a history at least of four hundred years.

The fact that Sumo has been regarded as divine sport is reflected in the way of doing in Sumo such as rules and manners. Sumo is governed by strict rules of game and also by manners such as expressing gratitude at the beginning and end of the game, always clear the sand ring by a broom since it is a divine arena, purify the arena by throwing a handful of salt by every wrestler, clean the hands by holly water at the beginning of match etc.

One of the required subjects of Shimada sonjuku is to learn the history and culture of Japan. Japan is a country which has a long history, profound traditions, and rich cultures and arts. The young entrepreneurs learning at Shimada sonjuku should do their best to learn these valuable inheritances of their own countries. To meet the objectives, Sonjuku members are required to study in the area of cultures, for example, such things as Noh play, Kabuki, Tea ceremony, Bunraku play, Ukiyoe art. Sumo is an important subject in this category of study.

One may understand why we chose Sumo to study when we recognize at least the historical background as written briefly above. However, the forms, rituals, rules and manners as described above can be understood well by reading some documents and watching Sumo tournaments. We suspect, however, that the essential value of the culture of Sumo exists much deeper than such outlooks. We conjecture that such values must be with the way of living and thinking of Sumo wrestlers, Oyakata and those who constitute and support the Sumo world. For this reason, we decided to visit Sumo-beya to see how Sumo people live and work.

III. Morning training

In the morning of May 6, we, interested members of sonjuku, my grandson, Yuta, his parents and his Phillipino friend, Gino, who stayed two weeks with Yuta's family as home stay, got together at Oguruma-beya. Oguruma Oyakata welcomed us and introduced us to the hall of the house which is used for multiple purposes, training, meetings, and joint meals etc. In the center of the hall, there constructed Sumo ring.

The ring is set on the clay floor in the shape of circumference of a radius of 10 or so feet. The circumference is defined by a half berried straw rice bag. The surface of the ring is covered thinly by sand. The surface is though always kept clean by constant sweeping by a broom.

When we entered the hall, some ten or so young Sumo wrestlers were warming themselves up by light exercise for the subsequent more harder training. When all of us get together in the hall watching their exercise they started to practice the regular menu of the training.

The gist of the training is that each wrestler strikes against his match on the ring. They strike with the utmost might, speed and punch. Their bodies soon get ruddy. They repeat this practice on an on. Continuing this practice soon exhaust them. They take a brief pause and breath deeply several times and come back on to the ring.

The more experienced wrestlers train younger and less experienced ones hard. They meet the rush of the young one, push back and whenever the challenger has any moment of weak guard or unbalanced stance, they throw them or even beat them down on the ground. Repeating this is hard

and exhausting. The more experienced powerful wrestlers do this against the younger ones apparently wishing the younger challengers will grow strong by this disciplining.

Watching this hard and exhaustive training, we can see the most important is to stand low, step straight forward, fast with the utmost concentration of power in the moment. To do this successfully, the wrestler needs physical power but perhaps the more important is the never easing and never tiring fighting spirit.

The more experienced and powerful wrestlers look apparently bigger and mightier. This is the result of hard practice and eating well that help to develop their muscle and body physically. At the same time, since they have gone through the period of hard and intensive training they certainly are equipped with much tougher fitting spirits.

After the training of younger wrestlers have been over, the more experienced and higher rank wrestlers join the session of training. Since they are more powerful, strong and well trained, their strikes are much more heavier and punchy. Their motions and moves are more straightforward, quicker, and powerful. Their strikes are impressively powerful indeed.

Oguruma-beya currently has three higher rank wrestlers. They are: Takekaze, 8th rank of Maegashira, who used to be Sekiwake-rank up to last year, Yoshikaze, 14th rank of Maegashira, Amakaze, Juryo 5th rank. Here, let me explain the ranking of Sumo wrestlers. Sumo is has a highly structured system of stratification by ranking. The ranking is determined purely by the fight record. It is therefore fair and rigorous.

There are several hundred Sumo wrestlers. Each of them belongs to one of some 50 or so "Heya" or stable. The ranking statuses consist largely of two major classes, one is Makushita, literally meaning below and outside the curtain, and Makuuchi, above and inside the curtain.

When a young boy join the Sumo world at the age range of 15 to 20 or so, they join the entry level class. After some training they can fight at the tournament at the entry level for a few days than 15 days. When they show good result of fight they are promoted to the rank of Jonokuchi. And

if they achieve very good results, then, they are promoted to the rank of “Juryo.”

Juryo wrestlers are now regarded as full-fledged wrestler called “Sekitori.” Sekitori is a sort of pronoun for the professional Sumo wrestler. Juryo is the highest echelon of “Makushita” or below the curtain class. Wrestlers in the Makushita class are finely ranked in some forty or so tiers according to their fight records.

If they show good results in fights at Juryo level, then, they can go on to the rank of Makuuchi, inside the curtain class. Makuuchi wrestlers are rigorously ranked according to their fight records in a few dozens of tiers of Maegashira. Above the Maegashira, there are three high rank positions, from the low of Komusubi, Sekiwake, and Ozeki. Above them is the highest rank “Yokozuna.”

The wrestler, Takekaze occupied the position of Sekiwake until a few months ago. You can imagine how great and honorable to be Sekiwake for Takekaze himself and perhaps more so for Oyakata and Mrs. Oyakata because they have long been looking after Takekaze as their cherished child.

After the training session, we were invited to eat together with wrestlers. They eat usually the cuisine called “Chanko” this literally means to dine many good things together. Chanko is prepared by younger wrestlers also as part of their required training. The dish was rich and delicious. No wonder why wrestlers develop their body with this meal after the hard training.

Takekaze joined us in our seats. He told us about himself, his boyhood, his ambitions, and his career. Interestingly he in fact wanted to become a teacher. He reads well, thinks deeply still now. His talk on how to foster young people and how to manage the organization was quite interesting and insightful.

After the precious experience of watching their morning training, and enjoying wonderful Chanko, we left the stable. Mr. and Mrs. Oguruma Oyakata cordially saw us off saying the it would be to their pleasure if our visit was useful for us to learn a part of old traditional culture of Japan.

IV. Oguruma-Oyakata and his story

I have been acquainted with Mr.Oguruma for some years by introduction of my friends. Mr. and Mrs.Oguruma kindly invited my family as well to various occasions of getting together at his “stable” so that our association with Oguruma-beya is family like indeed.

Mr. Oguruma, when he was an active wrestler with his professional name of “Kotokaze,” he was known as a famous and glorious wrestler for his brilliant fight records and prizes, and for the fact that he occupied the Ozeki position, only next to Yokozuna as long as 22 season rounds.

He is, however, known as a wrestler who suffered from “tragedy” twice due to injury of his knees and was called a wrestler who saw the hell. This means that he dropped from the position of Sekiwake , the third top rank in the Sumo hierarchy, down to the 30th rank even under the curtain, namely, Makushita. He worked hard to climb up the ladder by strenuous efforts and came back again to the Sekiwake position. But he again suffered from injury of his knee and had to drop toward the bottom of the hierarchy. He never gave up. With incredible effort and strong will, he climbed the ladder again to reach the position of Sekiwake. Not only that, he left great records including the grand victory of the tournament and was nominated as Ozeki, the title which he kept 22 rounds until he felt that his body told him the time to retire.

For a couple of years around 2012, I have been busy and not had an opportunity to visit him and I did not know that he suffered from even a harder tragedy and hardship as an Oyakata and an executive of Sumo association. He gave me a book recently which made me realize the great story of his challenge to recover from this tragedy.

In the morning of April 4, 2012, he was on Sumo tour to Fukui prefecture, at Japan sea side, as a Sumo association executive in charge of Sumo regional tour. Because of preceding bad weather, the floor of the Sumo hall was wet covered by a soft plastic sheet. He was walking to examine the situation, and suddenly slipped and fell down to the floor knocking his head. After a while he wanted to stand up, and realized all the body except his head is paralyzed like dead. He hurt seriously nerves connecting from

head to the rest of his body.

He was hospitalized. He was unable to move any parts of his body. He barely was able to talk. That's all he could. He really thought that his life virtually ended. He was agonized. He thought about his life in vain. At some points, though, he was inspired by his doctors and nurses that he could have a hope for his life. Since then, he worked hard himself with good advice from experts and support and encouragement of his wife and family. After 7 months he made a miraculous return back to work as Sumo association executive. He was so happy to show up as a TV commentator of Sumo tournament in November even though his body functions are not complete.

V. Observations

What I wish to convey in this essay is that the most important essence of Sumo, as Japan's most traditional culture, is the fairness and never resigning strong spirit. And this valuable essence is seen eloquently in the life of Mr.Oguruma.

Sumo is a very rigorous but fair sport. Victory or defeat is clearly seen on the spot because the rule is very simple. The wrestlers are promoted or down graded purely and simply according to fight records. This is a fair rule. Even the injury is not counted as exceptions. In the case of Kotokaze, Mr.Oguruma's name on the arena, he had to be down graded from the third top of the hierarchy with several dozens of ranks down to nearly the bottom, even twice. And nothing other than his strong will, strenuous efforts, and fight records could save him from the "hell." Sumo is in this sense perhaps the most rigorous sport in the world.

Kotokaze and Mr.Oguruma's incredible recovery twice from the "hell" as an active wrestler, and miraculous recovery from the fatal accident as an Oyakata eloquently tells us his strong spirit to fight no matter how hard the challenge may be, rigorous and strenuous efforts, good advice of Sumo superiors, experts like doctors and nurses, and encouragement of friends and fans, and above all of them profound and warm of love of his wife and family. With all these virtues he strongly live his life in the Sumo world which he loves unlimitedly.

This is exactly the essence of the most precious value of Japanese culture which Sumo represents. And this is perhaps the very power of Sumo which attracts many foreign young boys to join the Sumo world even it is deeply immersed in Japan's medieval traditions and rituals.