



Searching For The Ideal Yokozuna

by Chris Gould

Direct from sumo's Ryogoku heartland, Chris Gould tries to make sense of his September surroundings when answering a question posed in the wake of Asashoryu's suspension: 'What makes an ideal yokozuna?'

Introduction

As Asashoryu's wing wizardry on the football field dominated the newspaper silly season, a devout SFM reader asked me, in the light of his behaviour, to examine the qualities of a 'true yokozuna.' The person tabling the request was Japanese and extremely upset that the Mongolian maestro had not apologised for the apparent trouble he had caused. This individual contended, along with many others, that I should not hold Asashoryu up as an ideal grand champion.

I thus embarked upon my September trip to Tokyo firmly determined to cast the net far and wide in the hunt for genuine yokozuna qualities. I asked Japanese stewards on my flight; fellow spectators in the Kokugikan; people in restaurants and on the street. The most uninspiring responses, funnily enough, came from the rikishi and oyakata themselves, with one of the latter consort stating that the toughest yokozuna he ever fought was Kitanoumi 'because he was big.'

It soon became clear that nearly all

my Japanese interviewees were forwarding the same opinions, with minor variances. Were I simply to detail the results of my interviews, readers would merely be confronted with what they already expect: that a yokozuna must be more determined than the rest, must have the hinkaku (grace and elegance) of a role model, and must aspire to greatness in shin (spirit), gi (technique) and tai (physique/ health). It is important, in the context of the last three qualities, to remember that the yokozuna and ozeki (formerly sumo's highest rank) are ineligible for the shukun-sho (fighting spirit), gino-sho (technique) and kanto-sho (outstanding performance) awards. Such are the expectations upon the highest rankers that they should convey these qualities in every bout.

The pattern of responses was ultimately more intriguing than the responses themselves. Why were the interviewees' opinions so similar? Was there some invisible overarching concept binding them together? After two weeks of scouring the society surrounding me (and re-analysing my previous Japan trips) I concluded that there was. From Ryogoku to Roppongi, from Asakusa to Akasaka, and from Nishiarai to Ikegami, I was forever exposed to the unstable relationship between two legendary Japanese concepts: honne and tatemae. An

understanding of these two words, and their practical implications, adds an immense amount to our understanding of sumo and its greatest warriors.

Honne and Tatemae

Honne is translated in the dictionary as 'real intention.' Although perfectly capable of good deeds, it is often viewed negatively as a product of individual selfishness which threatens to destabilise collective harmony. Honne can be portrayed as impulsive in nature; the sort of impulsiveness which leads a woman to invade the dohyo during a Takekaze-Goeido match or draws Norwegian businessmen to Roppongi bars almost immediately upon arriving in Tokyo. That said, however unsettling honne may be, it is derived from the word hon, which is poignantly translated as both 'book' and 'genuine.' (What does this say about how people are expected to view the information in books?)

Military rulers were used to being surrounded by brutish figures whose honne made them greedy for power. To curb such enthusiasm, those on high were anxious to promote the doctrine of tatemae, the individual's outward obligation to society. Put crudely, tatemae revolves around the proposition that: 'what the people don't think about won't hurt them.' It tries to offer all-encompassing certainty in an

uncertain world. It seeks to cause no offence when offence seems inevitable. In public life, it is the get-out-of-jail-free card for the incompetent. Tatemae was conceived to conserve the existing order by rulers whose grip on power was always fragile in times of belligerent rival clans. Particularly so during the Edo Period (1603-1867), tatemae was used to uphold the notion that the greatest good would be achieved by not overthrowing the ruling shogunate. Tatemae was thus the antidote to impulse; the stable way of life to which all honne had to be subordinated.

The tatemae notion of the greater good certainly exists in present-day Japan. Anybody who rebels against it is automatically deemed selfish, worthy of being ostracized – and preferably punished. The first principle of contemporary tatemae appears to be that racial homogeneity is the key to a stable society. Leading on from this are the official lines that gaijin are more likely to commit crimes than Japanese, and that it is mostly the foreigners that hang out in seedy night-time hotspots. The principle of self-censorship is also important, meaning that respectable newspapers should leave the controversial stories to the tabloids. Whichever the subject, the message is: don't rock the boat and don't attack the beliefs that make our society the stable bliss that it is. Thus, don't spread undue panic among smokers by admitting there is incontrovertible evidence that smoking harms.

Tatemae is visible in any society but particularly so in a Japan where – quite frankly – people live or die by it. The doctrine is well illustrated by two prominent events which occurred during this year's Aki Basho.

The departure of PM Abe

On the fourth day of the Aki Basho, Japanese Prime Minister

Shinzo Abe finally announced his departure from office. The honne version of events would suggest that he left his post due to poor opinion polls, disastrous upper house election results, the shouldering of several problems left by previous PMs and a repeated inability to find an uncorrupted Farm Minister. However, the tatemae explanation for his departure – which sought to avoid any hint of instability in government – was that he was suffering from 'stress related stomach problems' which rendered him 'unable to continue as Prime Minister with dignity.' (Had he not mentioned the exact nature of his ailment, his dignity might have been 'better retained'). To buttress the tatemae explanation (which was only given in a subsequent conference nearly two weeks after Abe's official leaving speech), not one but two doctors in white coats were wheeled out to sit at a bench to his right. Such are the dramatic (and oftentimes comic) lengths to which the Japanese will extend to add credence to tatemae.

The election of PM Fukuda

While Abe continued to flounder in the background, the quickfire election of his successor occupied the foreground. In the search for a 'new generation' leader, LDP members were asked to choose between 66-year-old Taro Aso and 71-year-old Yasuo Fukuda. Both men owed their political existence to tatemae, the doctrine which initially bound them to track the political footsteps of their fathers, and subsequently earned them promotions on the back of their fathers' successes. Were LDP members to have voted according to honne, Aso would probably have been chosen. He was popular in the countryside where the LDP had suffered recent losses and scored well in the cities come election time. He was more dynamic than Abe. He was humorous, like the celebrated ex-Prime Minister Koizumi. And,

critically, he went down very well with the party's grass roots. Alas, though, LDP members were preoccupied with pondering who would least rock the boat, and thus voted according to tatemae. The shrivelled Fukuda – politely described as a poor person's John Major – was thus elected, neither because of his brilliance nor because of his experience, but because he was the 'safe Grand Old Man.' Unlike peasant-inspiring Aso, Fukuda was the plc Chairman who kept city financiers on-side. Unlike Aso, he did not try to be younger than he was and appealed to older voters rather than youthful radicals. Unlike Aso, he represented stability over possible change and was less likely to seek imposition of his will upon his Cabinet. And unlike Aso, he was reserved in public and did not make insulting remarks about people with Alzheimer's. Although the Asahi Shimbun contended that Fukuda was an ambitious carnivore who portrayed himself as a grass eater, it neglected to mention that if LDP bigwigs told him there was no meat, he would believe rather than challenge them.

Tatemae and sumo

In sumo, tatemae predictably seeks to preserve the unity and form of the wrestling community. The 10 commandments on the wall at Azumazeki-beya indicate the key principles, particularly those of doing one's best and respecting one's elders and opponents. The word 'gambarimasu' (to do one's utmost) is a highly important nuance in sumo circles and is the most commonly used verb among sumotori – especially in public. In a sport derived from the austere samurai code, where greatness was defined by pushing oneself to physical and mental limits, the verb 'tsutomemasu' ('to try') is painfully insufficient. Gambarimasu is what the tatemae-based society expects, and nothing less. According to tatemae, it is also improper for sumotori to

humiliate an opponent and shove them into the audience when they are already beaten. It is proper for a sumotori whose tournament fate has been decided to be mindful of an opponent whose fate has yet to be decided. It is proper for a yokozuna to exhibit invincibility and mastery of one's mind, and to retire not when he is at the top but when he is convinced that his strength has been sapped. If honne rears its ugly head in extreme form, it should be beaten down with a bamboo stick. It is particularly improper to wrench the bamboo stick from the hand of the oyakata and snap it over one's knee, as one leading non-Japanese sumotori did.

Tatemaie is the element that uniquely bonds sumo to the Japanese people. Although less detectable in today's limp Kokugikan atmosphere, the original tatemaie by which all great yokozuna have been judged is still abundantly present in Ryogoku. It resonates in the howling voices of the sumo jinku singers, whose kimono-wrapped passion for their sport is enchantingly unnatural by western standards. It radiates from the TV screens that replay old sumo matches in black-and-white and record the thunderous applause of electrified spectators. It is glorified in the numerous (and often gigantic) pieces of art in and around the Kokugikan and by the dohyo of the sumo-themed restaurants.

It is tatemaie that leads each of my interviewees to offer the same answer to the question of a yokozuna's qualities. The old videos prove it. The audience is enraptured by the public life of the sumotori and cares not for their private background, perhaps positively realising that sumotori are entitled to one. Sadanoyama, Taiho, Yoshiyama – each black-and-white yokozuna is judged according to the formidability of

his round stomach, the cuts and bruises on his keiko-scarred limbs, the fierceness of his glare, the attractiveness of his looks, the power embodied in his beer-glass fists and boulder-sized shoulders, the number of wins he records. Although the Yokozuna Deliberation Council was founded in 1951 precisely to address issues of yokozuna character, the private (honne) and arguably most important half of this character is ironically ignored by the sumo masses. Only the most serious cases of honne sidelining tatemaie are ever reported in the mainstream; and even then forgotten within a few years.

As with Japanese society at large, greatness in sumo is defined by what the wider public (tatemaie) make of you on an impersonal level, and not by the opinions of those who really know you (honne). This being the case, the great yokozuna are merely those who have won the most yusho (Taiho), secured the longest rensho (Futabayama), triumphed in more bouts than any other (Chiyonofuji) or represented the golden fusion of talent and matinee-idol looks (Wajima and Takanohana II). Unsurprisingly, though, if these yokozuna are judged according to honne, their greatness begins to look more fragile. Ask the police officer who dealt with Futabayama during his frenzied night with the Sun Goddess; the sumo journalist who watched two of the above yokozuna deal with novices; the fitness instructor who coached another of the above yokozuna. The verdicts will differ remarkably from the official tatemaie line.

Even if conformity to tatemaie is taken as the sole indicator of a yokozuna's merit, such an indicator throws up analytical problems and ethical dilemmas. The two following yokozuna bouts are cases in point.

Onokuni v Hokutoumi: senshuraku, Aki 1989

The unpredictability of honne is brilliantly illustrated by this famous match. Onokuni entered the contest with a score of 7-7 and was thus on the verge of becoming the first yokozuna to post a losing score in a 15-day tournament. He desperately needed the win to preserve not only respect for himself but for the rank of yokozuna. Hokutoumi, on the other hand, had already registered 10 victories and had only pride to fight for. The tatemaie outcome – that which kow-towed to the greater good – was obvious: the giant Onokuni should have won. However, because both wrestlers stayed true to their honne, Onokuni lost. The rank of yokozuna was publicly humiliated.

Herein lies the difficulty in passing judgement on the greatness of these yokozuna. Judged by honne, these wrestlers are incredibly noble, bravely plumping for chance over stability and riding the resultant storm. But judged by tatemaie, both are to be condemned. Tatemaie requires each wrestler to positively promote sumo's highest rank. It thus encourages both men to 'gambarimasu' – in the most liberal sense of the word – to ensure that Onokuni wins the bout, and even offers to cover for them through the marvels of self-censorship. The honne of both men refuses to countenance such an option, meaning Onokuni and his rank suffer accordingly. Tatemaie thus produces the seemingly absurd outcome whereby two wrestlers are to be lamented for performing with complete integrity. However, the tatemaie argument is not to be dismissed entirely. After all, have not Onokuni and Hokutoumi been blinded by the selfishness of their individual honne, and thus lost sight of the greater good and the result that Japan expects? Are not

many of the social problems in industrialised societies due to too many individuals valuing honne above tatemae?

Takanohana v Musashimaru: senshuraku, Natsu 2001

For the predictability stemming from tatemae in action, SFM readers should look no further than this legendary contest. Takanohana was hopelessly injured coming into the match, to the extent that Musashimaru did not expect him to turn up. Tatemae dictated that in true bushido (warrior-like) spirit, Takanohana gritted his teeth through the pain and gallantly continued to fight. The moment that Takanohana followed the tatemae teaching, Musashimaru was left with a fait accompli. Tatemae ruled that Musashimaru must not injure his opponent. The only way of not injuring an opponent who was already injured was... to do nothing. Thus, Musashimaru showed extreme reluctance to battle, executing henka on his shattered foe in the regulation match and succumbing with minimal resistance in the playoff.

Again, though, how do we judge the greatness of the two yokozuna? Takanohana is to be praised for hurdling the pain barrier, but is it just for this very act of tatemae to present his opponent with a fait accompli? Alternatively, it can hardly be just for a 225-kilogram Hawaiian to pummel a crippled Takanohana with the full force of his strength. How do we actually decide if praise or condemnation is due?

In truth, these contradictions will

always exist in a tatemae-ruled society. Tatemae is not designed to be fair; it is designed to enshrine a particular way of being and conserve it for future generations. There will be winners and there will be losers, but so long as the net result produces surface-level stability, every tatemae-following soul is supposed to be happy. Sumo is no exception.

Asashoryu in Mongolia, Summer 2007

Whatever the limitations of tatemae as a barometer of greatness, it is essential in enabling us to understand the current Asashoryu furore. To find out why the Majestic Mongol is so vilified in Japan, I encourage the reader to find a tatemae explanation for what he did. Try as the sumo association might, they could not find one – and neither could the Japanese public. The yokozuna had unquestionably produced a sick note signed by a doctor to excuse himself from the summer tour. This same yokozuna then unquestionably appeared on TV playing as a 24-stone winger in a charity football match. Such a glaring contradiction is tremendously inconvenient to tatemae, whose very function is to deny that contradictions exist. Although Asashoryu was actually injured, how could anyone who saw his dives on the football field not at least be tempted to question the legitimacy of his sick note? According to sumo association (NSK) Rijicho Kitanoumi, Asashoryu's honne had shone through with highly embarrassing consequences. In the absence of a tatemae explanation for events, the lack of respect for the greater

good was expected to be met with a tearful apology from Asashoryu. The apology failed to come and Japan's residents lost patience both with him and the NSK. In the absence of contrition, a tatemae punishment had to be found by the NSK. Hence Asashoryu found himself under Mongolian-hospital-arrest while, on each day of the basho, his supporters mourned the sorrowful silence after Hakuho's dohyo-iri.

Conclusion: Beyond tatemae?

This article should not be read as an examination of tatemae rather than as a criticism of it. No-one denies that the stability of tatemae is comforting and that were we to live our lives entirely by honne we might be immensely frightened by the conclusions we draw. The question of the ideal yokozuna is not something that can be isolated from the masses who adore Japanese sumo. We cannot judge the yokozuna without first asking how the bulk of the sumo world clearly wishes him to be judged.

Although it would be far more interesting to assess yokozuna on their honne and their personalities, the vast majority of sumo fans wish them to be measured against tatemae. Some of them simply don't have the information required to think otherwise; most simply wish to concentrate on what happens in the ring. With this in mind, although the relationship between sumo and tatemae is a boat worth rocking, my love of professional sumo and the respect for the country encircling it – whether justified or not – dictates that, at this time, I am not the person to rock it.

