

Kokugi Konnections

by Chris Gould

Exactly one year ago, SFM featured Sumo's Class of March 1988, the incredible intake which produced three yokozuna and one ozeki. Since then, many of the bouts between the Class of '88 headliners have been posted on youtube, and make for thrilling viewing. Perhaps more importantly, these fine matches are a snapshot of sumo's most recent Golden Age, when Japan still produced rikishi sufficiently impressive to ward off the threat of foreign domination. Tradition versus Modernity, Japan versus USA and artistic yotzu-zumo versus brutal oshi-zumo (the rapier versus the bludgeon, as the late Lyall Watson would have said) are just some of the electrifying issues raised as Takanohana, Wakanohana, Kaio and Akebono illuminate our youtube screens.

The most interesting rivalry is surely that between giant Hawaiian Akebono and Japan's Prince Charming, Takanohana, which can be witnessed in detail at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNimERUCUt4> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seUkoUAhzJw>. For over a decade (unfortunately, their sub-makuuchi clashes are not chronicled), these two fighters appeared ruthlessly intent on picking up where the stablemasters left off in the 1970s. Back in the disco era, Akebono's oyakata, the husky-voiced orange-belted Takamiyama, entered many fascinating duels with the comparatively diminutive Takanohana I (oyakata and father of Takanohana II). Takamiyama, clearly disappointed at frequently losing to a man some 50 kilograms lighter, somewhat modestly

described the rivalry with the words: 'We fought over 40 times and I only won about 20.' Thus was spawned the constant battle to avenge the result of many a classic contest, and the videos prove that the combatants rose to the challenge spectacularly.

The Akebono-Takanohana match-ups are eye-openers for several reasons. Firstly, Akebono oftentimes shows astonishing hand-speed and belt-skill for someone of his gargantuan stature. Secondly, Takanohana's supreme sense of balance when wrestling with a 200-kilogram weight appears incomparable. Thirdly, Akebono's bone-crunching tsuppari sends Takanohana crashing off the dohyo many times, and produces many of the 'unnecessary late blows' for which the sumo association frequently reprimanded him.

Fourthly, the classic model of a sumo wrestler steadily gaining weight with age is exemplified by the gradually ballooning frames of both combatants. Fifth, the atmosphere before these matches (even when the two fighters are mere maegashira) is explosive, and is rapidly replaced by a silent vacuum when the non-Japanese wins. Sixth, try to keep score of the 40-plus encounters. The wrestlers are incredibly evenly matched. Seventh, the ups and downs of Akebono and Takanohana can be clearly witnessed, the Hawaiian's sheer power giving him the ascendancy in the early encounters, the Japanese hero's increased weight and superior technique dominating the middle match-ups, and the erosion of Takanohana's

strength at an even faster rate than Akebono's contributing to a raft of Hawaiian victories at the end. A more vivid account of 1990s sumo can scarce be found.

Perhaps less significant, but no less intriguing, is the succession of encounters between Akebono and Takanohana's brother, Wakanohana, who famously claimed at his book launch that he feared for his life against the monstrous Hawaiian. Akebono, in a much earlier interview with the British journalist Fred Varcoe, scornfully portrayed Wakanohana as someone who was 'riding on [Hawaiian] coat-tails.' Precious little love was lost between the two, especially when Wakanohana sidestepped and humiliated the larger man to win the 1990 juryo yusho in the first of their video'd encounters at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvY3PXORSIc&NR=1>.

Henceforth, the rivalry teaches us the following. Firstly, Wakanohana was a much more unorthodox fighter than his younger brother, a 'department store of techniques' heavily reminiscent of his uncle, a legendary yokozuna of the same name in the 1950s. Secondly, the endings of many Ake-Waka contests are scintillating, often eliciting incredible sparks of skill from Wakanohana to snatch victory from the some powerful jaws of defeat. Thirdly, Akebono – by the expressions on his face – appears to dislike Wakanohana far more than Takanohana! For some very strange reason, the second installment of their encounters has disappeared from youtube in recent weeks. We hope, for entertainment's sake, it will re-

appear soon.

Also of interest is the documentary of encounters between Takanohana and the still-active Kaio, which can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyLCkrWvhBk>. As Kaio piles on the kilos, he becomes a truly formidable adversary of Takanohana's, underlining exactly why his current form can be politely described as a pale imitation of the heroics he once regularly produced. By the late 90s, Kaio had become as strong as

an ox, and a fighter that Takanohana evidently did not relish having to face. His delicious kiri-kaeshi in July 2000 is one of the boldest techniques ever attempted on the revered yokozuna – and surely how Kaio would like to be remembered. Also notable is Kaio's considerable stamina, which is presumably key to his being able to hold the rank of ozeki at the age of 36.

So, if you want to ingratiate yourselves with the finest sumo intake ever witnessed, or gain a

further insight into the halcyon days of 1990s sumo, feel free to check the listed links to the matches which shaped sumo for a generation.

Finally, exactly one year ago, SFM also conducted an interview with Hanako Dosukoi, a leading sumo pundit. Readers of Japanese may wish to check out her latest web entries at:

<http://www.citywave.com/osaka/dosukoi/>.