

# Makiko Uchidate Retires

## A tribute to the first woman who served on the YDC

*by Chris Gould*

It is vital to remember, when considering the significance of Makiko Uchidate, that sumo's Shinto customs forbid women from laying feet upon the dohyo. Despite having relied on the skills of the okami-san for centuries, sumo had never allowed women to rise to any position of prominence within its ranks. In the mid-1990s, Japan's first female education minister, Ryoko Akamatsu, dared to suggest that The Yokozuna Deliberation Council, responsible for assessing yokozuna and ozeki, should include a female member. It took five years for her request to receive serious consideration. On the 10th day of the September 2000 basho, former NSK Chairman Tokitsukaze, who rather liked to portray himself as a moderniser, announced that he had "been toying with the idea of having a female member on the council for some time" and unveiled the playwright Makiko Uchidate as the first female representative on the YDC.

Uchidate's appointment was a convenient one. Six months earlier, the Japan Sumo Association (NSK) had received much unwanted media attention for its treatment of Fusae Ota, Osaka's inaugural female governor. The petite and bespectacled Ms Ota, a sumo fanatic, was thrilled to win election just weeks before the Osaka basho, at which she desired to present the Governor's Prize to the tournament winner. She appeared confident, publicly at least, of finally installing female feet on the dohyo, telling sceptical reporters

that: "We are now in the 21st century." Her provocative words cut little ice with the NSK, which kindly asked Governor Ota to "understand" that it "want[ed] to maintain the traditional culture." Unfortunately for Ms Ota, 'traditional culture' referred to "shintoism" and not "the 47-year-old tradition of Osaka's governor presenting a prize."

Ms Ota reluctantly agreed to send a male deputy on her behalf, and implored the NSK to examine how she could present a prize. She then asked (unsuccessfully) to mount the dohyo in each of the three ensuing years, and took her campaign to the liberal-leaning Asahi Shimbun. "I think it is high time that the NSK spelt out a new reformist vision to make sumo a sport open to everyone," she wrote. Her campaign drew a response from none other than Makiko Uchidate, who wrote that: "The rule banning women from the sumo ring belongs to the domain of traditional culture. It does not constitute a case of sex discrimination against women in the modern sense."

In stark contrast to the liberal TV dramas she has penned, Uchidate is highly capable of toeing the staunch traditionalist's line. I first caught sight of her stiff, liver-spotted visage and famed hair perm on a late-night TV programme, which saw her interviewed by four westerners who spoke Japanese fluently. Proudly dressed in a luminous sky-blue kimono, she summed up the principles of sumo as: "don't jump out of the way and try hard."

She resembled a harsh schoolmistress; her jaw was tight; the movements of her mouth heavily accented. She deployed the tone of Margaret Thatcher and the facial contortions of ex-French President Chirac (who incidentally is a sumo fan), coming across as more masculine than likeable.

That said, there was nothing untoward about Uchidate's loyalty to sumo. Throughout her 10-year team on the YDC, she could be seen in the front row on virtually every weekend of a Tokyo basho, donning a kimono on the first and last days and a woolly (often red) jumper in between. According to the broadcast which first introduced me to her, she "gave up her career in a big corporation" to write about the sport she loved, and scripted the semi-autobiographical TV drama *Hirari*, which was based upon a female sumo lover. Having coached her former university's sumo team, she cares deeply about Japan's national sport and has been forever unafraid to speak out when something fails to fit her sumo perceptions.

Her reputation for toughness was enhanced considerably in 2003, when she began taking an increasingly tough line against Yokozuna Asashoryu. She scorned his poor tegatana hand gestures when collecting his kensho envelopes, and sought to pounce on his every misdemeanour. Her view was simply that if a sumo wrestler disrespected the traditions of the sport, he should be dealt with severely and forced to leave – no matter how valuable

to the sport's economy he was. Her view against Asashoryu hardened considerably in 2007 when the Mongolian Yokozuna became embroiled in the infamous soccer scandal and slumped into mild depression. At that time, her view was that he should retire. In 2008, after Asashoryu provoked Hakuho on the dohyo in the Natsu Basho, her criticisms became scathing to the point where she would soon effectively refer to Asashoryu as a 'dead man walking.' During her retirement interview on January 25th 2010, a special parting shot was reserved

for the man whose bête-noir she desired to become. "I told the sumo association that they have been too soft on Asashoryu for too long," she said, typically sternly. "I said that he had to be dealt with, but the sumo directors remained silent when I spoke."

Uchidate also showed her appetite for a fight when famously taking on former NSK Chairman Kitanoumi in the summer of 2005. At that time, Kitanoumi reprimanded Takanohana Oyakata for discussing reform of sumo traditions on TV without official

NSK permission. Uchidate, who appears to have some reformist tendencies, publicly cried foul, claiming she couldn't understand "why Takanohana received a warning." It is thus deeply ironic indeed that only at the exact time of Uchidate's departure from the YDC, her sumo dreams seemingly came true: Takanohana gained election to the Board of Directors, and Asashoryu resigned in disgrace. Whether Fusae Ota will replace her on the YDC is an intriguing question indeed.