

Sumo and French Presidents From Chirac to Sarkozy: sumo and political rivalry

by *Dorian Marcellin*

All pictures courtesy of the sumo collection at the President Jacques Chirac museum, 19800 Sarran, France, <http://www.museepresidentjchirac.fr>

The passions of politicians are often used by their opponents in order to discredit them, especially when these passions are somewhat far away from the daily lives of electors. In France, we had something like that between 1995 and 2007, with the most important man of the French State, the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac. It is well-known that he is fond of sumo wrestling. Many French felt it was just an eccentricity, but a lot of Japanese have appreciated this interest. Indeed, Mr. Chirac is more widely known as a general

fan of Japan. His own museumⁱ, situated in his political fiefdom of Corrèze, makes that clear, housing many objects from Japan, and some really nice sumo-related items, like a gyoji outfit and fine tegata.

Mr. Chirac's interest permitted the facilitation of diplomatic relations between France and Japan. It seems easier for Japanese politicians to discuss with someone who respects their own country's traditions. There are plenty of facts that illustrate the strong bond the former French

President had with the Land of Rising Sun. He used to have a little dog, a maltese, whom he called "Sumo", and his new female dog from the same species is called "Sumette!"

A bit more seriously, according to some French diplomats, Jacques Chirac was calling French Embassy staff in Japan during sumo tournaments to know rikishi results on a daily basis! (Probably enough to slightly annoy the staff). In their book on political morals and habitsⁱⁱ, journalists Christophe Deloire and Christophe Dubois



Figurine of Yokozuna Takanohana Koji presented to President Chirac by Mr OBUCHI Keizo, Prime Minister of Japan, during Chirac's official visit to Japan, November 16th to November 22th, 1996



Tsuna, presented to President Chirac by Mr OBUCHI Keizo, Prime Minister of Japan, and his wife during a dinner at the Elysee Palace in Paris, January 7th, 1999



Gunbai, fan used by Gyoji, presented to President Chirac by Mr OBUCHI Keizo, Prime Minister of Japan, and his wife during a dinner at the Elysee Palace in Paris, January 7th, 1999

even wrote that the Eurosport channel was regularly sending basho recordings directly to the French President. Mr. Chirac also created the “President of the French Republic Cup” which was given each year to yusho winners. The cup was awarded during his two terms, until he left the presidency in 2007. Quickly, it even became the Jacques Chirac Cup. Quite evocative!

2007 was the year that marks the end of the honeymoon between the French presidency and Japanese culture. Mr. Nicolas Sarkozy replaced Mr. Chirac and what had been foreseen in terms of their difference in “style” proved to be largely accurate. The two men belong to the same political party but they are not alike and they don't like each other much either. There will be no “Nicolas Sarkozy Cup” for rikishi. Sumo archives on the official website of the Presidency have been removed, during a major redesign of the Elysée web portal. (In fact, one of Sarkozy's first gestures as President was to announce the cancellation of the French President's Cup for yusho winners, which risked sparking a diplomatic outcry with Japan!)

In 2004, Nicolas Sarkozy, who was by this time Jacques Chirac's Minister of the Interior, and barely known by Japanese media, made the headlines during a diplomatic tour of China. In front of many journalists and officials, he talked harshly about Japan and sumo: “How can anyone be fascinated by these combats between fat guys with lacquered ponytails? It is hardly a sport for intellectuals!” These remarks, first reported by the publication Paris Match, and

published by all the international press, were quickly denied by Mr. Sarkozy, but damage had been done to his image. It is also reported that he confessed in the same discussion he did not understand what made Kyoto a beautiful city. Thus, the Sankei Shimbun noted that these statements were “reckless and rude” and asked seriously about the French minister: “Has he ever visited Japan?”.

The lack of empathy towards Japanese culture from Nicolas Sarkozy largely remained in the background for Japanese media after he won the presidential election. The main newspapers did not overwhelm him with that fact but they often reminded readers that the new French leader “has very little to do with Japan.”ⁱⁱⁱ

During his term, Mr. Sarkozy has been regularly criticized by French media on his chauvinistic attitude. That said, there is also a general agreement that his harsh criticism of sumo and Japan was of course part of the politician to politician rivalry that the current President of the French Republic had with his predecessor, even though he was part of the same government. Political struggle often seems to require dirty tricks.



Sumo miniatures, presented to President Chirac at the G8 Summit in Okinawa, Japan, from July 21st to July 23rd, 2000



Poster of a rikishi, presented to President Chirac by Mr TOYOMASU Hideo, before 2000

Mr Chirac, who recently released the second volume of his memoirs^{iv}, recalls: “He saw fit to denigrate Japan.” The former French President makes it clear that at the time he took this personally, but he acknowledges that “to have responded to this, at least publicly, would only have led to a confrontation that (...) it would not have been (politically) worthy to participate in.” From 2002 to 2007, tensions were great between the two men. Jacques Chirac even considered ending the matter by dismissing his brash minister, writing: “Should I have made a more radical decision, as I

was advised? Sometimes I wonder about that!”

In the end, Nicolas Sarkozy remained minister. He patiently prepared the next step of his political career, until his accession to the highest position of responsibility in France, in May 2007. Thus, it is very likely that even if in 2012 Mr. Sarkozy earns a second term as head of the French State, he will not equal the record of visits to Japan of Jacques Chirac (40!). However, even if there is no longer an “ambassador” of Japanese culture at the highest level of the French State, Japan and sumo wrestling fans will

continue patiently to defend their passions. Our two countries quietly celebrated their 150 years of relations in 2008: we must now sign up for 150 years more ... at least!

ⁱ Musée du président Jacques Chirac, 19800 Sarran - France

ⁱⁱ Sexus Politicus, DELOIRE Christophe, DUBOIS Christophe, Albin Michel, 2006

ⁱⁱⁱ Nihon Keizai Shinbun , may 2007

^{iv} Le Temps présidentiel, Mémoires, tome II, CHIRAC Jacques, BARRÉ Jean-Luc, Éditions Nil, 2011



Humorous miniatures of rikishi, presented to President Chirac by a private individual in February 2000