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The Change of tides:
The advent of non-nationals in Sumo

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Leiðbeinandi Gunnella Þorgeirsdóttir
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Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

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Abstract

Non-Japanese sumo wrestlers are common today, but that has not always been the case.

For over a thousand years sumo tournaments were exclusively held by Japanese men, and up until the 1960s foreigners were almost unheard of in the professional sumo scene. As the world's modernization and internationalization accelerated so did foreign interest in the National sport of sumo. Today the sport has spread to over 87 countries which have joined the International Sumo Federation. With an interest in professional sumo in Japan at an all-time low and with fewer wrestlers applying to stables than ever before, viewers of tournaments and media coverage of events has been decreasing, which is closely followed by western originated sports having overtaken sumo in popularity e.g. soccer and baseball. Yet the interest in sumo on an international scale has increased considerably. In which way has this rising internationalization affected the sumo world and the professional sumo world and how is it reflected in modern Japanese society, in what way did the wrestlers coming from overseas experience the sumo culture compared to how it is today? Today the sumo scene is largely dominated by Mongolian wrestlers, how did this come to pass and how has the society of Japan reacted to these changes.

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Introduction

Over the course of the last few decades the sport of sumo has been growing in popularity outside of Japan while decreasing in popularity in the country itself. (Krieger, 2013) Despite global interests, the Japanese Sumo Association has kept on attempting to tighten the rules of professional sumo in such a way that restricts foreigners from becoming too dominant within the sport, yet despite these restrictions' sumo has seen increasing success of foreign nationals. Some would even go as far as to call it a foreign invasion of some sorts. For example, the sumo announcer for the NHK Hiroshi Morita has been quoted saying "The sumo elders saw that there was a danger of this Japanese sport being invaded by foreigners," "so they were saying, 'enough is enough.'" (Krieger, 2013)

Looking at statistics, the foreign participation in the professional sumo circuit is quite low compared to the native Japanese wrestlers, while simultaneously producing better results. For example, foreign born wrestlers in 2013 made up one third of the 42 wrestlers that occupy the top division, and yet they only made up seven percent of 613 wrestlers active in 2013 and the only two Yokozuna that are active today are both foreigners (Krieger, 2013)

Currently there are two wrestlers at the top of the sumo world, both of whom are of Mongolian origin. Hakuho Shou is one of them is and in the year of 2019 is the greatest sumo wrestler of all time, having beaten almost every single old Japanese record of the sumo world by quite a margin. Currently Hakuho has over 42 top division championship titles to his name with the second-best wrestler having only 32 top division championship titles. which means that 42 times he has stood as the final winner of an entire tournament.

For quite a while I have been interested in the national sport of Japan, it's such a unique thing and yet I seldom hear people in my department or people that are interested in Japanese culture talk about it. In 2017 I embarked upon a 1-year exchange program to Japan through a program at the University of Iceland. During that time, I had quite a lot of experiences relating to sumo which sparked my interest even further. During my exchange I stayed in an all-male traditional dormitory, populated by mostly Japanese students and in September of 2017 the dormitories had a sports festival where students competed in all kinds of sports, including sumo. That was my first experience of seeing a sumo bout in person.

Although my interest in sumo had only just begun to grow, I was interested in discovering what the general attitudes towards the sport were in my close vicinity and to know what the others at my dormitory thought of it. I asked both the older caretakers and the younger students. The difference in their responses was stark, the older generation were men in their 60's and being asked about sumo made their face light up and resulted in a long discussion about the sport and their interest in it. One of them even went as far as giving me a rare item from the professional sumo circuit, an envelope which top-ranked wrestlers get their payments in. While I was told it wasn't valuable it would certainly be a highly sought-after item by collectors. Meanwhile the younger generation seemed to show almost no interest in sumo whatsoever, claiming that only their grandparents' generation would watch sumo and the popular sports today were western sports such as soccer and baseball. The demographic of sumo enthusiasts seemed to lean from middle aged to quite old. Although the sample size was only demonstrative and not definite seeing as I only had a small sample of participants, it still gave me an idea how the general public might think of their national sport.

What drew my interest were the foreign influences on the sumo world, because as a national sport I was curious how it would've changed over the last few decades as a result. I asked more people of the older generation about their thoughts on the Mongolian sumo wrestlers and to a lesser extent the Hawaiian wrestlers that used to dominate the scene before them. Some showed excitement at the prospect of foreigners enjoying their national sport and taking an interest, while others showed disdain and expressed xenophobic views on the matter. For example, "that foreigners are too big and shouldn't be allowed to fight toe to toe with the Japanese as they had a very specific body type" or scorn towards the wrestlers and in a way saying that the sport has been tainted. Regardless of that I found that quite a minority showed any hateful views towards the success of foreigners in sumo and that most were quite happy with the current state of sumo.

This thesis will examine the history, development and intricacies of the sport, and then consequently how globalization has affected the sport and the influence that non-nationals have brought to the sport.

When did foreign wrestlers first start competing in professional sumo in Japan, and how did that affect the national sport of Japan from that point on, and were the changes brought by introducing foreign wrestlers into the sumo scene good for the sport. Is the globalization of the sport a good thing or is it perhaps detrimental to the national sport of Japan? To answer those questions, we must first explore sumo from the start.

1.0 History of Sumo

The traditional sport of Sumo has been at the center of Japanese culture for over a thousand years. Sumo tournaments were held annually as a ceremonial festival that was supposed to predict the yearly harvest of agricultural crops. These ceremonial rituals have been dated to sometime in the Yayoi period (1000BC – 300 AD) where sumo developed as a ritual that predicted their fortunes and enshrined their deities (Ikeda, 1986. 202-204)

According to the Japan Sumo Association, sumo is a traditional sport and an expression of the fighting instincts of humans that is derived from a power comparison or wrestling. For around 300 years (794-1185) sumo was an event that was held at the imperial palace. (Japan Sumo Association)



Image 1: Sumo at the imperial palace 1

1.1 Samurai Era

Japanese warrior culture was a prominent feature of Japanese society and their warriors were called *samurai*¹, they are said to have lived by the bushido² code which is a set of rules that Samurai are expected to follow. It is said to have been very strict which led to strict training methods and training regimes that the samurai followed.

¹ The *samurai* (or *bushi*) were Japanese warriors. They were members of the important military class before Japanese society changed in 1868.

² *Bushidō* (武士道 *Bushidō*), meaning "Way of the Warrior", is a Japanese code of conduct and a way of life, for the warrior class like the European code of chivalry. It comes from the samurai moral code and places great importance on certain virtues like frugality, loyalty, martial arts mastery and honor

From the *Kamakura period* (1185–1333) until the *Warring states period* (1467 – 1600) sumo was an extremely popular and effective way for the *Samurai* to train. As the political power shifted over to *Samurai* rule, the focus of sumo shifted from ceremonial rituals to more of a martial arts style. One of Japans biggest historical figureheads Oda Nobunaga (1534 – 1582) a *daimyo* or a feudal lord that is often credited with the unification of Japan was extremely fond of the sport. In fact Nobunaga was so fond of the sport that he travelled all across Japan from the start of the *Genki* era (1570-1573) and up until the end of the *Tenshou* era (1573 -1592) collecting wrestlers for his personal collection of sumo wrestlers, he had his chosen wrestlers fight in the Imperial Palace in front of the Emperor and those who won would go on to become his personal vassals. (Ikeda, 1986. 202-204)

1.2 Edo period

From the *Edo period* (1603-1868) onwards, the strongest people among the *Samurai* and those who were proud of their strength, gathered from all across the country to compete in sumo for professional wages, and in the late *Edo period* or around 1790 Sumo was at an all-time high and around this time it was accepted as an occupation (Ikeda, 1986. 202-204)

Along with the kabuki³ theatre tradition, Sumo became increasingly popular among the masses and it was during the early *Edo period* that the original sumo organization was formed as well as all the rules being decided upon, and even today most of these rules are still in effect. Although the basis of the sport has remained almost the same, the rules were gradually refined

³ Kabuki(歌舞伎) is a classical japanese drama theatre performance.

and sumo fighting styles evolved and changed in such a way that it would become the basis of one of the main traditions of Japan. (Japan Sumo Association)

Many of the rituals and traditions set at that time are still relevant to the sport today, these include the ring entrance ceremony or *dohyo-iri*, traditional garb such as the *Kesho-mawashi*, which is a traditional sumo apron, the *mage* which is a topknot that the sumo wrestlers don on the top of their head, the traditional Japanese dress *Kimono* and the traditional scoreboard with the sumo rankings that decide the matchups and rankings the *Banzuke*. (Japan Sumo Association)

These traditions will all be further explored in later chapters

2.0 The Rules, divisions and ranks of Sumo

There are big tournaments in sumo that are held six times a year and within these tournaments' wrestlers face against each other in sumo bouts and depending on their performance they move up or down the ranking hierarchy. The hierarchy looks and works like a pyramid, with very few representatives at the top and very large majority near the bottom.

The *Banzuke* is the official document of sumo rankings and tournament standings in the sumo world, it's published before every *Basho* or tournament and it describes the wrestlers' hometown, name (or ring name) and rank in the sumo pyramid. On the *Banzuke* itself the wrestlers are placed into the East group and West group. The wrestlers that have been placed into the East group face against the wrestlers that have been placed into the West group. The top page of the *Banzuke* starts with the *Makuuchi* wrestlers who are the wrestlers in the top division

of professional sumo (see image 2) and is sorted by the top ranked wrestler in each sub division of the *Makuuchi* division. The lower the sub-division the smaller the printed characters on the *Banzuke* are and the higher the sub-division is the wrestlers name is written in bigger letters on the *Banzuke*.

(Hall, 1998. 46)

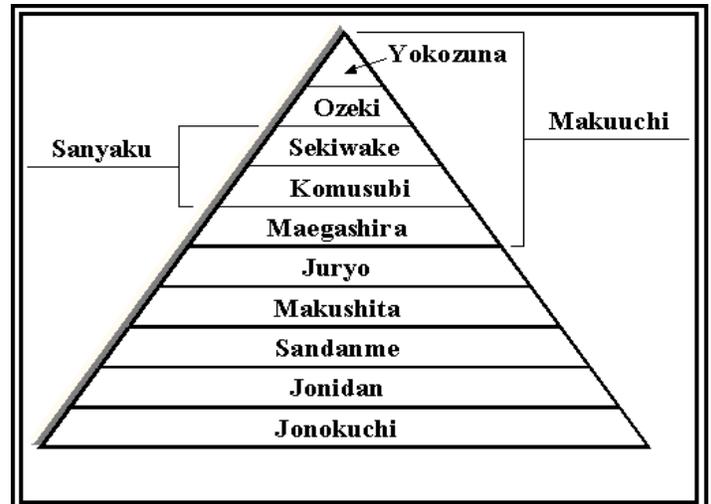


Image 2: The Division Hierarchy

2.1 Divisions and Rank

The Professional sumo scene is split into 6 major divisions and holds around 550 wrestlers in total.

Although only the top two divisions get wages, the other four divisions are still a part of the professional sumo bracket, albeit not at the level of the other two divisions, having lesser experienced and often younger people, they still are a very important stepping stone towards the higher divisions. The highest division and the one that gets the most media coverage is the *Makuuchi* division which is capped at the top, with 42 sumo wrestlers. The second major division is called the *Juryo* division and is capped at 28 wrestlers. The wrestlers in the *Juryo* division along with the *Makuuchi* division are called *sekitori*. The *sekitori* are the only ones allowed to don the famous topknot and wear colorful *mawashi* belts. Once they reach *sekitori* status they are assigned henchmen from the lower ranked divisions depending on seniority and rank in the upper divisions. The third division is the *Makushita* division which has 120 wrestlers competing for a spot in the *Juryo* division and thus becoming *sekitori*. *Sandanme* division has 200 wrestlers, the *Jonidan* division has around 260 wrestlers and the sixth and final division the *Jonokuchi* has around 80 wrestlers. The way the wrestler's advance ranks is to win matches in a tournament, the four

lower division wrestlers only have 7 days while the top two divisions get to wrestle the entirety of the *Basho*⁴ which lasts a grand total of 15 days.

The rule for advancement is usually quite simple, you must win more than you lose to advance, lose more than you win, and you will fall in the rankings. The *Makuuchi* division gets the most media coverage of all, and is thus split into different levels depending on the skill of the 42 wrestlers in it, at the top is the grand champion of sumo himself the *Yokozuna*, and to date 72 people have achieved this status with the latest promotion in 2017 of Kisenosato Yutaka, who had to retire in early 2019 due to injuries. Below the *Yokozuna* is the *Ozeki*, and they can be expected to win around 33 bouts over three tournaments on average. The *Ozeki* are usually around 3-5, the two ranks below the *Ozeki* rank are the *Sekiwake* and *Komusubi* which together are usually called *Sanyaku* which means the three upper tiers (*Ozeki* used to be considered a part of the *Sanyaku*). From the *Sanyaku* there are usually included at least 2 wrestlers from each respective rank in the tournaments. The lowest rank in the *Makuuchi* division is the *Maegashira* rank which usually has around 15-16 wrestlers and they are referred to as e.g. *Maegashira 12* depending on performance in the previous tournament. (Heilman, K. 2019)

2.3. Rules of Sumo

Sumo is a fighting sport and as a fighting sport it has its own set of rules and conditions for victory or defeat, the victor in a sumo bout is usually decided upon very quickly.

The loser of a bout is determined by a set of different rules, for example: being thrown out of the ring or the *dohyou*⁵ as it's called, touching the ground with anything apart from the sole of the

⁴ A *honbasho*(本場所) or *basho* is an official professional sumo tournament

⁵ The *Dohyou*(土俵) is a dirt arena surrounded with a thick rope which marks the place a Sumo bout takes place.

feet, using an illegal move or technique such as closed fist punches, poking of the eyes, pulling of the hair, groin kicks and kicks above the knee. Occasionally wrestlers even get their *Mawashi*, which is the belt that they wear, taken off completely exposing them which results in an automatic loss. If any of these conditions are met the wrestler will have lost the bout. (Hall, 1998. 64)

The bout starts with pre-determined rituals that the wrestlers must perform before any actual fighting takes place, these rituals can be extremely mentally taxing and as Mina Hall describes in her book *The Big Book of Sumo* "The Sumo wrestlers begin to stare each other down in a psychological battle that can be as exciting as the battle it precedes. It has been suggested that a winner can be determined by observing this ritual closely ". (Hall, 1998. 63)

The rituals preceding the bout differ between divisions and ranks and can be repeated up to a set amount of time, but once the referee calls for the match to start it is game time. Although the pre-bout warm-up has officially concluded, before the match yet another set of rituals and stare downs awaits. Staring at their opponent and trying to read their moves before the bout starts. The clash or *tachiai* must be simultaneous or the referee will call for a replay. If the timing is even slightly off the referee will call a *matta* which means that one of the wrestlers either did not properly sync up their *tachiai* or had a false start. In the upper leagues' wrestlers are often fined for such behaviour. (Hall,1998. 64)

2.4 Techniques of Sumo

There are multiple types of techniques in modern sumo, but there are some specific types of moves or techniques that end the match or so called winning moves.

the winning moves in sumo are called *kimarite*, and currently the Japan Sumo Association recognizes 82 types of winning moves, most of the moves are a mixture of grip, slap/thrust and push, although there are throwing moves, leg tripping, twists and downing opponents with specialized moves. During the *Edo period* (1603-1868) the recognized finishing moves were around 48, while in 1960 they had increased to 70. During the last three decades there have been considerable changes within the sport which has been argued by Zerling, is largely due to the top wrestlers in Japanese sumo having been foreign born. The influx of foreign-born wrestlers has influenced the creation of more techniques and finishing moves, for example the holds of Greco-Roman wrestling, American football influenced charge and moves influenced by Korean wrestling. Lady but not least Mongolian grappling which has had the greatest influence so far, the success of Mongolian grappling moves can largely be attributed to the current *Yokozuna* Kakaryu and Hakuho who are both of Mongolian origin. (Zerling, 2016. 23)

2.5 Sumo Tournaments and official bouts

A *Honbashi* or *Bashi* for short, is an official professional sumo tournament where ranks change on the *Banzuke*. There are six *Honbashi* every year, three times in Tokyo, the opening *Bashi* from the 13th of January to the 27th, the summer *Bashi* from May 12th to May 26th, and the fall *Bashi* in September which is from the 8th to the 22nd. One time in Osaka, the spring *Bashi* which is from the 10th to 24th of march. One time in Nagoya, usually called the Nagoya *Bashi* and starts the 7th of July and ends on the 21st of July. The last *Bashi* of the year is called the Kyushuu *Bashi* and is held in Fukuoka from the 10th of November to the 24th. (Sumo Schedule, 2019.)

The difference between *Honbashi* and a normal *Bashi* lies in the literal meaning of the name, *Honbashi* stands for “main *Bashi*” or the one of the official 6 tournaments, while *Bashi* can be

used more widely to refer to unofficial sumo tournaments. Each *Honbasho* lasts 15 days, so 90 days out of the year sumo wrestlers must participate in an event that dictates their rank, what clothes they must wear and whether they receive a salary or not. The lower divisions start early in the morning while the upper divisions have their bouts later in the day giving them time to practice before the matches. (Gunning, 2019)

3.0. Rituals and Ceremonies

The rituals and ceremonies of sumo are numerous. The pre-bout ritual starts with the *Yobidashi*⁶ singing the names of the competing wrestlers. Once the wrestlers have entered the ring, they bow to each other to show respect, then return to their starting positions at the edge of the *dohyou*, the big circular arena where upon sumo-bouts take place. The wrestlers clap simultaneously and show off their muscles by stomping and flexing at the edge



Image 3: Pre-bout stare down

of the ring and perform what is called *shiko* exercises which refers to the wrestler's ceremonial leg raising and stomping. picking up purifying salt and scattering it across the *dohyou*⁷. Various Shinto⁸ rituals are also a part of their routine, such as washing their mouth with *chikaramizu* or holy water. Which echoes the rituals performed for purification by visitors to a Shinto shrine before they can approach the shrine itself and pray. The wrestlers then expel the water out of their mouths to purify themselves because all sumo matches are believed to be in presence of the

⁶ The *Yobidashi*(呼び出し) an usher who calls the names of wrestlers and sweeps the sumo ring.

⁸ Shinto is an ancient Japanese belief system, literally meaning "the way of the gods".

gods and therefore a wrestler's body and mind must always be pure. Every time a wrestler enters the circular arena, they throw salt around as it's believed to purify and cleanse the *dohyou* of evil spirits. (Hall, 1998. 64)

The wrestlers then take their initial stance in front of each other and put their hands on the ground then pummel the ground with their fists. The contestants subsequently glare at each other in what is known as the *niramiiai*. Which is a stare down where wrestlers can try to intimidate the other wrestler and is a part of the pre-bout ritual. Repeatedly walking around, standing up, stomping, throwing salt, and staring at their opponent is a ritual known as the *shikiri-naoshi*. (Sergeant, 1966. 33) This can last up to 4 minutes in the *Makuuchi* division, and up to 3 minutes in the *Juryo* division. (Sergeant, 1966. 33).

Before the pre-bout rituals and the pre-bout preparations start, there is a special ceremony that occurs at the start of every day of the tournaments, which is the ring entering ceremony.

This ceremony is two-fold. One for everyone except the *Yokozuna* and one for everybody else that's participating in a sumo tournament. This is called the *dohyou-iri* or the ring entering ceremony. All the contestants will wear their traditional *Kesho-Mawashi* which dates to the era when the wrestlers used to proudly wear the name of their sponsoring lord and is an ornamental belt worn only during the ring entering ceremonies. First the referees enter, then the wrestlers will follow suit in reverse rank order ending with the highest ranking *Ozeki* in the tournament. The wrestlers will circle the arena in a sumo like fashion with the traditional stomping and raising of hands to show that they have no weapons and they intend to play fair. The wrestlers clap to alert the gods, and this also serves as purification.



Image 4: Ring entering Ceremony

3.2 Yokozuna Dohyou-iri

The entrance of the grand champion himself is spectacular and warrants a special chapter all on its own. Once someone has reached the *Yokozuna* status, that person then must perform in a special ring entering ceremony. Each *Yokozuna* performs the ceremony with their own flair. (Hall, 1998. 56) A referee follows a clapper-beating announcer down the aisle, followed by the grand champion's *tsuyuharai* or attendant. Then the *Yokozuna* himself will follow suit and lastly his sword bearer or *tachimochi* comes last down the aisle. The stark difference between the other

wrestlers and the *Yokozuna* is the apparel that adorns his *Kesho-Mawashi*⁹. A massive thick rope encircles him below his stomach area, and in the back is tied into a magnificent bow. (see image 5)

The rope line is called a *tsuna* and is referred to in the title of the *Yokozuna* which means sideways rope, therefore the rope itself symbolizes the grand



Image 5 : Hakuho's Dohyou-iri

champion and in that manner only the *Yokozuna* himself can adorn one. The zig-zag looking white strips of cloth or *gohei* as they are called, symbolize the connection sumo has to *Shinto* as these are usually found hanging in front of the entrance to *Shinto* shrines. Surrounded by his retainers the *Yokozuna* squats down and after rising and bowing to the spectators he performs his own personal version of the entrance ceremony. The air is very tense until the first *shiko*¹⁰ from the *Yokozuna* as the first foot hits the ground it's greeted by a thunderous roar from the young onlookers from the spectator stands that look at the performance with awe. There are two main *Yokozuna dohyou-iri* styles that dictate in what way the stomps, hand extensions and claps are performed. The first one is called *Unryu* and the second one called *Shiranui*.

Unryu is known to the more defensive approach. While *Shiranui* is more of an aggressive approach coined by *Shiranui* the eight *Yokozuna*. Examples of previous champions that use the *Shiranui*

⁹ *keshō-mawashi* is an ornamental belt worn by wrestlers in the top two divisions of Sumo during the ring entering ceremony.

¹⁰ A ceremonial stomp that sumo wrestlers do for both rituals and training. a single raised leg then stomping.

style: Chio-no-yama, Tochinishiki, Waka-no-hana, and the *Unryu* style: Asashoryu, Akebono.

(Sargeant, 1966. 63)

There is an instance of a unique ring entering style known as the *Hitachiyama* style which is a style coined by previous *Yokozuna* Hitachiyama Taniemon, which is a slight variation of the *Unryu* style. (Kuroda, 2008)

His story is quite unique as he was at the top of his game at the turn of the 20th century and he ties Japan to their Tokugawa government samurai past as Hitachiyama himself was a former *samurai* (Kietlinski, 2011)

Yumitori-shiki or the bow twirling ceremony is the last ceremony of the day. With that the days' bouts have come to an end. The bow twirling ceremony originated from a tournament hosted by Oda Nobunaga to celebrate a victory, the winner received a considerable amount of rice and a honorary longbow which is believed to be the same bow that is used in the ceremony today. Usually wrestlers from the *Makushita* division are made to do the bow ceremony where they twirl the bow around in a spectacular fashion signalling the end of the current day of the tournament. (Sargeant, 1966. 63-64)

The referee in sumo or *gyoji* is held in very high regard, his judgement is never questioned and is regarded as sacred. All the referees have been given the surname of Kimura or Shikimori as has been tradition from time immemorial. Like the wrestlers the referees start young and work from 13 to 14 years old officiating the lower ranks where the wrestlers are closer to them in age and experience. A referee's profession is as esteemed and tough as the wrestlers themselves, they themselves have a rank and different attire depending on rank. The lowest of the ranks officiate in simple black clothing barefoot, while the highest of ranks wear colourful clothes and wear socks

and sandals. Mistakes in judgement may cost them their rank and esteem which makes mistakes in judgement remarkably rare. (Sargeant, 1966. 68)

3.5 the arena

The arena or the *dohyo* is a square platform constructed from clay and sand, with half buried rice straw bales forming a circle and is where sumo-bouts take place. Above the *dohyo* is a structure that resembles a Shinto shrine that has been elevated into the air and forms a roof over the arena. This furthermore ties into Sumo's inherent ties to the *Shinto* religion. There are two white lines that lie parallel to each



Image 6: Professional sumo arena

other in the center of the ring with about a meter gap between them. This is the starting line for each wrestler. (Sargeant, 1966. 68) It's clear that the world of sumo has a lot of customs and rituals, although sumo has mostly stayed the same for hundreds of years, with the internationalization of the 20th century and with the influx of foreigners joining the Sumo Association, it's safe to assume that some degree of change has been observed in the sport.

4.0 Internationalization and Life at the stables

Sumo has been a center piece of Japanese tradition and sport for a very long time, however with the introductions of foreign sports as well as interests in Sumo from other cultures there have been considerable changes.

The modernization of traditional sports in Japan is considered to have started in the late nineteenth-century or in the beginning of the Meiji period to be exact. The modernization of many institutes including sport tended to refer back to the bushido code¹¹ and had a specific term associates with it “*wa-kon yousai*” which means “Japanese spirit, Western technology” this meant that although they wouldn’t change international sport rules to their liking, they would adapt a stance of bushido in their way of thinking and playing mentality. (Kelly & Sugimoto, 2007)

During the *Meiji* restoration period (1868-1889) the newly established government set up diplomatic relations with Europe and North America, which together with rapid modernization a rising number of western sports were introduced to Japan such as tennis, soccer, baseball, volleyball and wrestling, while at the same time Japanese national sports such as sumo, kendo, judo, karate were still being celebrated. Although the sports introduced from abroad were western in nature the culture of Japan was shaped by the *bushido* code based on confusion principles such as respecting your elders, following the strict hierarchy as well as maintaining discipline. The rapid westernization had a great affect on the Japanese economy and caused considerable and rapid social changes, yet sumo was one of the few things left almost untouched. (Oinuma & Shimpo, 1983)

¹¹ A loose set of rules that dictates how a *samurai* (a Japanese warrior) should live his life

One of the core beliefs that was introduced from Europe to Japan was the new-found emphasis on physical education and a healthy body. The sport of sumo suffered in popularity with this new emphasis on athletic and fit body types. In contrast to other sports in the modern world, it was perceived as being un-athletic, too traditional and feudal. It came under heavy criticism from the modern press, as Japan's image abroad seemed to be that of primitive mostly naked obese men. The new ideas about the body and modesty threatened the world of professional sumo and thus its popularity began to wane, and other more athletic sports and more modest sports began to rise in popularity. (Gilbert & Watts, 2014)

The physique of Sumo is still important for the sport, and to better understand that we need to delve deeper into the food and lifestyle of a professional sumo wrestler. Chad Rowan, a foreign-born professional sumo wrestler, recalls his first experiences in Japan in his biography.

4.1 Lifestyle and food at the stables

The difference between the experiences abroad and the experiences that people will have in the professional sumo world can be quite different. For example, in order to keep their body big and strong, what is necessary for them nutritionally to maintain their strength and what do they eat. Where do they sleep and how do they treat their fellow wrestlers, especially the ones that are foreign.

The food that they eat in the stables is called *Chankonabe* and it's a staple dish of sumo wrestlers, it's very nutritious and packed with calories. It mainly consists of a rich broth filled with vegetables, meat and or seafood depending on the variety, however during sumo tournaments instead of fish or meat they add chicken as it's considered good luck in sumo. A chicken after all

walks on two legs, while cows walk on four legs and fish do not walk at all. Which refers to the sumo wrestlers' steadfast will to stay grounded on their own two legs. (Edwards, 2019)

Each stable in Japan has an *oyakata* or a master that helps train the wrestlers and run the stables, currently there are 46 active sumo stables in Japan all observing similar traditional habits. (Sumo Beya Guide - Nihon Sumo Kyokai Official Grand Sumo Home Page)

The life in stables is hierarchical and is a difficult life for all wrestlers, but especially the ones that are lower ranked, they're expected to cook, clean and serve the ranks above them. The wrestlers eat a lot of food and train from morning till evening. To understand better we need to take a practical example of someone that lived that lifestyle.

4.2 Sumo stables

In his biography "*Gaijin Yokozuna: A Biography of Chad Rowan*" Chad Rowan or Akebono as he became to be known as, recounts his experiences in the stables. On his first day of arriving he was met with cold disdain and air of distrust. Even though there were fellow wrestlers from Hawaii and the owner of the stable Takamiyama was from Hawaii as well, he was offered no special treatment. He learned the tough way that the hierarchy was largely based on age, experience, aggression and strength. A fellow foreign 18-year-old that had come to the stables a year earlier was already getting recognition, for instance being able to command the lower ranked Japanese wrestlers. Such was the discipline. (Chad Rowan, 90)

Traditionally the youngest wrestlers wake up first and head to the training area, they help each other bind their *mawashi* and start doing *shiko* stomps, followed by open palm striking a log pole in the corner. Chad tried to imitate the other boys doing *shiko* and even though he couldn't keep up he believed he would improve. Several times however the Japanese wrestlers sparred

each other while leaving out Chad and laughing at him. Every single time a higher ranked wrestler entered the area to start their training for their day the wrestlers that were not currently engaging in a sumo bout stopped and bowed and yelled something in Japanese that Chad did not understand. Following their entrance, they looked at him and said something in Japanese and laughed, and everyone but Chad joined them in laughing. Once the *Oyakata* entered the room the atmosphere changed instantly, and everyone became serious. He made Chad fight a few bouts with a few different wrestlers, although Chad was a one of the bigger men in the arena and towered over most of the Japanese wrestlers, he was easily overthrown and pushed out of bounds by their superior technique, Sumo wasn't as easy as he had expected it to be. There was more to the sport than just simply thrusting and pushing your opponent out of the ring. Taylor the big Samoan, was his last opponent and no matter what Chad did he could not budge him and was quite literally man handled and thrown to the ground by him. He recalls that after several hours of intense training smell of food wafted through the air. (Chad Rowan, 94)

Although food was something Chad greatly desired at this point, he was not to have it until everyone else had finished eating. He had to stand with other low ranked boys and attend to the other wrestlers and give them rice, food and whatever they needed. When the upper ranked wrestlers finished eating Chad and the lower ranked wrestlers had to clean the dishes and put them away. Only then they could shower and clean their bodies. When they returned, they were allowed to consume the leftovers. They were also expected to do chores after that and prepare sleeping arrangements for wrestlers higher in the hierarchy.

Taylor informed him that since he was a *gaijin*(a semi derogatory term for a foreigner), he needed to stand up for his rights more and try not to be abused as much. He explained that the

hierarchy was based on the *Banzuke* and that once you become a *sekitori* the good life would start, everyone taking you out to eat, cars, salaries, the good life. At the stables Chad was getting teased and bullied and called words such as “*Gaijin yaro!*” which a derogatory terminology meaning is something akin to “Damn foreigner”. He started to resent the word *gaijin* and it was clear that foreigners and especially those lower in rank were not treated with the same respect as a Japanese wrestler would’ve been. (Chad Rowan, 96-100)

5.0 Non-native wrestlers in sumo

Professional sumo is exclusively practiced in Japan, regardless of that fact wrestlers from across the globe are not barred from participating in the professional sumo scene in Japan. (Sharnoff, 1993. 199-200) The effect that the first non-native wrestlers had on the future of sumo was remarkable and their own subjective experience compared to their Japanese counterparts would have been completely different to a native one. (Sharnoff, 1993. 199-200)

The first unofficial foreigners that are believed to have reached a *sekitori* rank were the Japanese-American Toyonoshiki, and the Korean-Born Rikidouzan. In 1949 they achieved their rank right after the second world war but were listed as Japanese, as Korea was at the time considered a territory of Japan. The first officially recognized foreigner that won a championship causing considerable commotion as well as the first non-Asian wrestler to win a championship was the Hawaii born Takamiyama. Followed by other Hawaiian wrestlers trained by Takamiyama later, such as Konishiki, Wayne Vierra and Akebono. (Sharnoff, 1993. 199-200)

Before 1968 however, non-Japanese sumo wrestlers were a relatively unknown factor in the professional sumo world, but from that year on, there was a notable change in perception as a non-Japanese sumo wrestler by the name of Takamiyama earned a spot in the top division in 1968

and achieved his first championship victory in 1972. In the year of 1987 a Hawaii born wrestler by the name Konishiki became the first non-Japanese person to achieve a first *Ozeki* (the second highest rank in *Makuuchi* division) promotion. A few years later Akebono from Hawaii became the first foreigner to reach the *Yokozuna* (The highest rank attainable in Sumo) status in 1993. Followed by Musashimaru from Hawaii who became the second foreigner to reach *Yokozuna* in 1999. (Sharnoff, 1993. 200)

Although Hawaii had seen the light of success in the world of sumo didn't stop other foreign nations from entering the professional sumo scene . In 2005 Kotoushu, a Bulgarian born wrestler, became Europe's first wrestler to achieve the *Ozeki* rank and achieved a top division championship. He was followed by wrestlers from other eastern European countries such as Georgia and Russia. Although European and American born wrestlers had great success in the professional sumo bracket, wrestlers from Mongolia claimed the throne in recent times and have been a dominating force for years.

The success of Mongolian sumo wrestlers is unprecedented and with multiple *Yokozuna* promotions of Mongolians in recent years followed by the promotions of Asashouryu and Hakuho to the rank of *Yokozuna* the shape and face of sumo was changed forever. Up until the year 1992 stables had been allowed to recruit as many foreigners as they pleased. At one point for instance the *Oushima* stable recruited 6 Mongolian wrestlers at the same time, this was soon followed by a statement from the Japan Sumo Associations new director Dewanoumi a former *Yokozuna* that he was intending to limit foreigners in sumo stables. ("Sumo Circles Consider Limiting Foreigners in Sport", 1992) Although no official ruling was passed at the most stables stopped recruiting foreigners for several years. The following years after that the Japan Sumo Association recruited

only two foreigners per stable until the year of 2002 until the total amount of foreign sumo wrestlers reached 40. In that very same year, they decided on their one foreign wrestler per stable unless someone naturalized as a Japanese citizen. This rule was set in stone and still today it shows no signs of being revoked. In the year 2010 the Japanese sumo association even went so far as to change the ruling from 'foreign' to 'foreign-born', meaning that regardless of naturalized citizenship status, they would still be considered a foreigner and thus subjected to the 1 foreigner per stable rule. (Sharnoff, 1993. 201). Considering the steps the Japan Sumo Association took to ensure that stables were majority Japanese-born nationals, it's quite remarkable how well foreign wrestlers are doing in professional sumo in Japan. In order to better understand this, we need to look at a variety of foreign wrestlers and how they helped shape the future of international sumo.

5.1 Takamiyama

Jesse Kuhaulua or Takamiyama as he's known by in the professional Sumo world, was the first non-Japanese wrestler to achieve a championship in the *Makuuchi* division. In his auto biography "Takamiyama: The World of Sumo" he recounts those experiences in detail.

Originally, he had had no interest in sumo and was much more inclined to play American football, but the coach of the American football team suggested he trained in Sumo to train his legs and as well as weight lifting since his weak points were his hips and legs, so he joined the sumo club in Maui. Jesse took to the sport well and was chosen as a representative of amateur sumo receiving multiple invitations to visit to Japan and encouragement to take sumo seriously since he had the talent for it. (Kuhaulua, Wheeler, and Givens, D. T. 1973. 27) Eventually he was recruited by former *Yokozuna* Maedayama and on February the 22nd 1964 his life in the

professional leagues of sumo began. The culture shocks were plenty for the first time in his life he experiences a cold winter. Having to sit with your legs tucked under in a Japanese fashion and the sumo culture at the stables was difficult at first, but he soon got used to life at the Takasago stable. (Kuhaulua, Wheeler, and Givens, D. T. 1973. 28) As a foreigner that had just arrived in Japan, he was treated with respect and allowed to sleep and bathe with the higher ranked wrestlers as opposed to bathing with people his own age or rank. However soon after getting accustomed to that life, he had to adapt to being treated as an equal to the lower ranked wrestlers. Having limited language capabilities and being a foreigner in the sumo stable there was quite a lot of vocabulary that he would have to acquire to be on par with his stablemates. (Kuhaulua, Wheeler, and Givens, D. T. 1973. 43).

He was extremely dedicated to the sport of sumo and held multiple records. In 1972 he won a tournament championship and received a letter from the president of the United States which was read out loud in the sumo arena, making it the first time English was officially spoken out loud in the *dohyou*. His dedication paved way for his fellow Hawaiian sumo athletes, Konishiki and Akebono the latter of which later went on to become the first ever foreign grand champion of sumo.

5.2 Konishiki

Salveaa Atisanoe, better known as Konishiki, was the first true American superstar in the world of sumo, within two years of starting sumo he rocketed to the top of the ranks, guided by Takamiyama at his stable in the early 1980's. Him coming in and challenging the upper brackets so quickly, coupled with his outspoken attitude sparked a huge controversy in the sumo world. Konishiki fought at over 600 pounds and thus faced allegations that he and the other wrestlers

from Hawaii were damaging the sport by emphasizing size over technique. (Pearlstein & Edwards, 2003) The critics invoked Commodore Perry's "black ships" which is a historical reference to when Japan was under siege by American gunboats forcibly being made to open their borders and is commonly referred to when Japanese people feel threatened by the outside world. This time it carried a specific racial overtone because of Konicki's Samoan and Polynesian heritage and his dark skin color. (Pearlstein & Edwards, 2003)

Years later Konishiki charged the Japanese sumo association with discrimination as he was denied of his rightful promotion to *Yokozuna* regardless of his success and this exclusion was viewed by many as a blatant proof of xenophobia within the Sumo association. Although he was forced to settle for *Ozeki* he didn't become widely popular until he started losing and had become an underdog. Only then did he win the approval of the Japanese audience. Today he's viewed a celebrity and a cultural icon in Japanese television, from releasing hip-hop songs to countless television series and drama appearances. (Pearlstein & Edwards, 2003)

6.5 Wayne Vierra

Wayne Vierra is a former professional sumo wrestler from Hawaii, he started his journey to Japan in a very similar fashion to his predecessors. At the age of 18 in 1990 he was drafted into the world of sumo by the 80-year-old Larry Aweau who had been the man responsible for recruiting most of the professional Hawaiian sumo wrestlers. Like the wrestlers who went before him Wayne arrived in Japan with little to no knowledge about the country, its language or the culture. His choice of stable was clear, the *Azumaki-beya* run by Jesse Kuhaulua or Takamiyama as he was known by in the sumo world. In that stable Wayne met another hopeful up and comer from Hawaii, Chad Rowan. The two of them became the best of friends and practiced together with the

shared dream of sumo fame and glory. Wayne rose fast like those who came before him and he was about to enter the top divisions of sumo when a tragedy struck him and his pancreas ruptured, unfortunately this ended his professional sumo career and he had to return to Hawaii where he continued his sumo dream and journey in the amateur bracket. Today he's one of the most successful and popular amateur sumo wrestlers and hopes to lead the sumo team of the United States of America to the Olympics. Although Wayne's journey had ended his friend Chad Rowan endured.

6.6 Chad Rowan

Chad Rowan was born in Waimanalo Hawaii, his success in the professional sumo world is unprecedented by any foreigner so far and he became the first ever foreign *Yokozuna*. He took the ring name Akebono which means dawn or rising sun, originally mocked for his gigantic size in a sport where low center of gravity is key to success, he proved the doubtful audience wrong by winning a grand tournament in 1993 and being promoted to *Yokozuna*.

Akebono's success made him the third *sekitori* from Hawaii, sumo takes a lot more than just size and strength, and interestingly the wrestlers of Hawaii have shown great perseverance in the sport and have achieved more success statistically than any other ethnic group including the Japanese. (Sharnoff, 1990)

6.7 Henry Armstrong Miller

The only Non-Hawaiian professional sumo wrestler from America. Was from St. Louis, Missouri. Given the ring name of Sentoryu which to the Japanese people sounded like his hometown, being half African-American and half Japanese gave him a darker skin tone than most people in the Sumo world which in turn gave him quite a unique perspective on the racial tensions between

stablemates. In the movie *Sumo East and West* he recalls his experiences and details the thinly veiled racism in the Japanese culture. (Pearlstein & Edwards, 2003)

Given how brutal the entry requirements for professional sumo is for non-Japanese born wrestlers, with limits on how many wrestlers can enter each stable and many wrestlers struggling with limited language capabilities and/or having trouble fitting into the Japanese society. The foreigners banded together and grouped together in one or two stables such as the stable run by former Hawaiian sumo wrestler Takamiyama until foreigners were limited to 1 per stable in the year of 2002. With limits in place and nowhere to go, some opted to go back to their home country and start and/or join the amateur circuit, which has a lot less restrictions and allows a lot more people to band together without nationality restrictions.

7.0 Popularization of Sumo abroad.

With growing internationalization comes greater interest in sports or culture from other countries, in the case of sumo, widespread popularity has been achieved in places such as Mongolia, Brazil, and the United States. There are official amateur tournaments and leagues, women's leagues, and a world championship tournament. As well as a major movement that aims to move Sumo towards becoming an Olympic sport.

The goal of the amateur sumo bracket is to get it accepted as an official Olympic sport, and thus needs to create the official structure that other Olympic sports need to adhere to, such as having different weight classes. Also important is to remove gender-based discrimination seeing as Shinto rituals forbade women to enter the *dohyo*, splitting the genders into different brackets. Shinto rituals must also be abbreviated and made uniform to conform with international sport regulations. Nevertheless, the standard set of rules for sumo will remain the same. (usasumo)

The International Sumo Federation was founded in 1992, with the intent to make sumo more accessible to interested athletes worldwide, currently there are over 80 nations that are involved with the International Sumo Federation which is growing, partially because it's open to any country interested in joining. In the Amateur leagues the respect and discipline towards the sport is maintained, whilst the athletes do not need to dedicate their life to the sport and adapt their life to the sumo lifestyle fulltime. (usasumo)

The International Sumo Federation or the IFS as it will henceforth be referred to as, has also fully endorsed the International Olympic Committee's Anti-Doping code and adopted the World Anti-Dope Agency's anti-doping regulations. Before all championships all wrestlers are regularly tested for controlled substances that may break the rules of the IFS. The International Olympic Committee has also fully recognized Sumo as a candidate sport for the Olympics.(ifs-sumo)

Although in professional sumo the sport is exclusively for male wrestlers only, the amateur circuit and amateur leagues do not need to adhere to that principle. With notable women sumo championships in 2005 during the Duisburg World Games, as well as having the first ever Junior Women Sumo World Championship in Estonia. (ifs-sumo)

The Japan Sumo Federation is the official branch of Japanese Amateur sumo world. It was established on September 1, 1946. While the oldest recorded amateur championships date back to the year of 1915. With the founding of the Japan Sumo Federation they started getting more widespread recognition than they had been getting up until that point. In 1980 was the first time they invited foreign teams from overseas to come compete in the amateur bracket, this is regarded as the first international amateur sumo tournament in the world. Following that foreign

interest in the sport grew immensely with more and more foreign wrestlers competing every year and in 1983 Brazil and Japan established the what is regarded as the forerunner of the IFS (ifs-sumo)

The growth of the league has been immense, and the IFS currently has 88 member countries registered. With both women's championship and international junior sumo championships in 1999. It's clear that the Amateur Sumo world has been growing on all frontiers and with that the IFS is dedicated to continuing to do their best to promote sumo to the world.(ifs-sumo) Although women have been flourishing in the Amateur Sumo bracket they are very much still taboo, as they're forbidden from entering the ring. During an exhibition match in Kyoto a politician collapsed on the scene, in response to this a woman rushed into the ring to save the politicians life, the referees could be heard repeatedly in the loudspeaker yelling at the women to get out of the ring. Even though a life was in danger, they considered the ritual sanctity and the rules more important. (Rich, 2018)

While the IFS is busy expanding and bolstering their ranks and introducing sumo to the world, the professional Japanese sumo association is busy restricting the entrance of foreigners into stables and enforcing a very strict quota of 1 foreigner per stable. Although there is a steady stream of foreigners eager to try their hand at professional sumo, they're simply not allowed. There are split opinions between opening the doors completely or keeping it largely native with the latter having the widest amount of support from the Sumo Federation officials, regardless of pressure from foreign Sumo Federation agencies. (Tai, 2005)

Conclusion

Sumo is a sport with a rich history, designated as the national sport of Japan it comes with plethora of history. Going from a completely homogenous community to seeing foreign talents stepping into the spotlight was tough to bear for the more traditionalist fans. At first the foreign wrestlers were met with disdain and blatant xenophobia often in the form of “Damn foreigner” along with other similar terms. This mixed with racism as some of the contestants from Hawaii and America had dark skin color.

When one of the first foreign wrestlers Konishiki from Hawaii, was expecting his *Yokozuna* promotion he was denied it, largely due to the fact he was an outspoken foreigner that was not in line with the traditional Japanese spirit and up until then there hadn't had a foreign grand champion before.

The Japanese sumo association slowly loosened up their hold on tradition and although they did not allow more foreigners into the world of sumo, they did relax the criteria put on them and that allowed the first foreign Yokozuna Akebono Taro from Hawaii to ascend to the top of the *Makuuchi* division.

Along with the wave of Hawaiian sumo wrestlers such as Konishiki, Takamiyama and Akebono, a flurry of new techniques was brought to the world of sumo such as the American football charge/tackle, and with the arrival of Georgian sumo wrestlers new grappling techniques were developed. The Koreans brought their signature moves from their own wrestling sport, and finally the one that caused the most fundamental change, the Mongolian grappling and wrestling techniques. Before the 1960s the finishing moves were only 48 and had been quite consistent for hundreds of years. Currently however (2019) there are now 82 recognized finishing moves. One of the big reasons for this explosion in development of sumo after it had been relatively unchanged

for hundreds of years is partially due to the growing globalization which has been made possible by the advent of aeroplanes and other reliable form of long-range transport vehicles. The rapid modernization and internalization of Japan was followed by decrease in local interest in their national sport of Sumo and at the same time increase in foreign sports such as soccer and baseball. Although the official professional Japanese Sumo Association tried to artificially limit the success of foreign wrestlers by first limiting each stable to 2 foreigners and then suddenly limiting it even further by only allowing a single wrestler to join, an International Amateur sumo organization rose up and began having their own tournaments, much to the dismay of the professional league.

The IFS was first founded in Japan and has grown on a remarkable scale with over 87 member countries and an attempt at becoming an official Olympic sport. In order to become recognized as an Olympic sport the international sumo association has had to adhere to strict sport guidelines, such as weight classes and gender-based leagues, and consequently the growing internationalization of Sumo is creating a different version of Sumo in the form of a regulated Olympic sport.

Many retired foreigners from professional sumo either returned home and joined the amateur circuit or started their own amateur leagues in their respective countries, and many hopeful would be professional sumo wrestlers these days opt to rather join the amateur league since it has a softer entry barrier towards non-Japanese sumo wrestlers. Women that are interested in sumo have also found refuge and a home in the International Amateur bracket as there are no gender restrictions, which has allowed the sport of sumo to evolve.

Although the future of the Japanese sumo world is unclear, the modernization of Amateur sumo continues to bloom and is constantly evolving away from its origin.

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Picture list

The following is a picture reference list of images used within

IMAGE 1: a picture depicting sumo at the imperial palace. Retrieved March 15th, 2019 from http://www.sumo.or.jp/img/sumo_museum/history/history02.jpg

IMAGE 2: a picture depicting The sumo hierarchy Retrieved march 15th, 2019 from <https://kokyuhou.exblog.jp/20547028/>

IMAGE 3: a picture depicting a prebout staredown ceremony Retrieved March 15th, 2019 from <https://cdn.clipkit.co/tenants/381/articles/images/000/005/857/large/f2a36a68-12a5-497f-8f2a-f124929b799e.jpg?1511780351>

IMAGE 4: a picture depicting a traditional ring entering ceremony of *Makuuchi* wrestlers. Retrieved March 15th, 2019 from <http://www.sumo.or.jp/img/ticket/timetable/pic16.jpg>

IMAGE 5: a picture depicting *Yokozuna* Hakuho's entrance ceremony Retrieved March 15th, 2019 from <https://tachiai.org/2019/01/31/update-yokozuna-hakuho/>

IMAGE 6: a picture depicting the entirety of the sumo *dohyo* Retrieved March 15th, 2019 from <http://www.sumo.or.jp/img/ticket/timetable/pic25.jpg>

