
// = italics

[] = query; alternative; translator's addition

-- = long dash

East of the /Dohyo/, West of the Gaze

The first time I ever saw a Grand Sumo tournament was in middle school I think, at the Kuramae Kokugikan arena in Tokyo. Taiho and Kashiwado were the idols of my generation, though for us kids sumo was something you watched on television; occasions to see it live in the flesh were few and far between, nor did I even dream I'd ever have the chance. So you can imagine how excited I was when I found myself sitting in the box seats down in front by the /dohyo/. To this day, I still remember the thrill.

These were special seats ringside, the so-called /suna-kamuri/ or "sand-topped" seats in the first row where one could easily be covered with sand kicked-up from the /dohyo/ (1). We were almost right next to the referee and judges, so that at times the giant wrestlers risked coming tumbling down on top of us – or so my cousins said to frighten me as we set out. When I got home, my parents told me they had spotted me on the television and I had looked so nervous, did I really enjoy myself? No, I guess I must have been on the edge of my seat the whole time.

In any case, the pressure was on from the very first match. Nothing like the sumo games us neighbourhood kids played after school. Seeing sumo live was something entirely different to what I knew, even from radio and television. It was a first for me. Essentially, I was scared out of my shoes. The /rikishi/ (2) were so much bigger than they appeared on tv...

/Hakkeyoi, nokotta!/
At that very instant, two gigantic bodies collided right before my eyes, the fearsome full

force of that fleshy impact brought home to me by the "sound:" a thick thud of bodily contact which could never come across on the television – absolutely indescribable.

/Nokkota, nokotta!/
I was so blown away, I couldn't even summon a cheer for the ones I liked; it was all I could

do just to sit there staring up at these titans. Their speed and strength and physical control seemed superhuman. Entirely unrelated to ritual and form, the terrible sound of raw power seemed to me to exceed the very forces of nature.

Years later, when I learned about the distant origins of sumo in Japanese mythology, it all came back to me. Remembered calmly and collectedly, I realised that what I had felt back then was more than just apprehension; my fear was mingled with a sense of religious awe. As if it was living proof of ancient Shinto myths like /kuni-yuzuri/, in which the divinities strengths, "competing for the realm," portray what seem like superhuman powers.

Curiously enough, sumo remains a religious rite to this day. Along with song and dance, sumo continues to be offered as a votive performance at many shrines in Japan and is even celebrated as a religious rite in some places. The /Hitori-zumo/ or "Solitary Sumo" of the Aichi Prefecture, near Nagoya, is one of the best known examples, in which a wrestler tests himself against the spirits; one lone man whirling about, throwing and being thrown by unseen opponents. As a rule, he fights three matches: one win, one loss, and the spirits customarily triumph in the last round. Held twice a year at rice planting and threshing times, this prayer for abundant harvests hints at the origins of sumo in agricultural ceremonies.

It is very likely that such ceremonial tests of strength were once offered to the gods throughout Japan. But were probably transformed into the sumo we know today sometime

during the Heian Period (794-1185). Already by the eighth century, we find records of court rituals called the /sumui-no-sechi/. Paintings from the Heian court show naked wrestlers apart from loincloths and topknots, much the same as they look today. Whether or not the rules were similar, the accepted theory is that this practice some 1300 years ago was a direct precursor of today's sumo.

Thereafter, in the Edo Period (1600-1868) – and especially by the latter half of the eighteenth century – sumo became a widely popular entertainment among the common classes. Later still, during the Meiji Era (1868-1911) and following modernisation, it took on the character of a modern sport. Thus, the sumo we played as kids is historically one part sport, one part entertainment and one part martial art; whereas vestiges of the sacred rite linger on in the ornamentation and ceremony of the Grand Sumo in its most refined and stylised form.

Thus, the whole of sumo – with Grand Sumo at the very pinnacle – constitutes a multifaceted nexus combining religion, leisure, combat, and athletics: an entire culture comprised not just of the big name /rikishi/ of Grand Sumo, but also of amateur clubs and sumo schools throughout the country. While the amateur world of sumo is not so well known – perhaps because the number of competitors is somewhat less than for baseball in Japan – it is surely here, in his project “Rikishi” that we see its more complex side. And it is precisely this face of sumo that Charles Fréger has captured.

Charles Fréger is known for his photographic portraits of individual members of social groups who represent and symbolise their collectivity by the clothes they wear and the things they hold, their postures and expressions. The places in which they are pictured are also fundamental; typically they are shown on their own territory, scenes full of significant details not found in any studio backdrop. This approach is already well established in contemporary art, the inclusion of numerous sociological clues places his work within the traditions of Western portraiture.

It is in this regard that Charles Fréger's /rikishi/ are so unlike historical images from early modern /ukiyo-e/ (3) to those of present-day journalism. The Japanese are traditionally accustomed to seeing these sumo wrestlers depicted in heroic /nio-dachi/ poses, wearing their /kesho mawashi/ (4): the exalted and envied champions of a national sport. However, what we discover in Charles Fréger's photographs are ordinary youths. Unknowns – for the time being – without names; few of whom might one day join the ranks of the Grand Sumo and leave their titles to posterity. Here we see no pomp and ceremony, none of the refinements or formalised atmosphere of the Grand Sumo; these portraits seem perfectly plain and unadorned, far from the image of a proud national tradition. As works of art these pictures of sumo are very likely the first of their kind.

Charles Fréger seems to seek out that primal state behind sumo's complexities, a vision of the "barehanded wrestling" it was before becoming a spectacle or ceremony. By no means limited exclusively to Japan – similar wrestling traditions can be found from Korea and Mongolia to Turkey and even in Senega – and the presence of foreign /rikishi/ from Korea and Mongolia in today's Grand Sumo competition reflects the spread of sumo across Eurasia. Here represented are the present-day enthusiasts of a competitive fighting tradition that has lasted, at least in Japan, over a thousand years.

For most Japanese, sumo is not something "to do" but something "to watch." Despite the relatively small numbers who compete it remains an important part of the culture, as is

apparent in the everyday usage of expressions in Japanese which are derived from sumo. The word /dohyo/ – the fighting arena – is for example, commonly used to mean "area of expertise" or "specialisation." Yet the earthen /dohyo/ ring itself is not so very old, probably deriving from a simple circle of spectators as late as the seventeenth or eighteenth century, judging from the first depictions of sumo as a spectacle in art.

Charles Fréger has photographed outside the /dohyo/. Not just in the sense of away from the physical fight ring, but removed from all the formalised ritual that has arisen around sumo. This distancing is, of course, due to the camera (although I imagine the photographer himself would say he engaged them in the /dohyo/ of photography.)

Looking at the eyes of these /rikishi/ reconfirms this sensation. Almost all of them are standing as they look straight ahead. Pictured before practice or maybe afterwards, perhaps en route to their /heya/ (5), one thing in common stands out: their piercing gaze, almost an air of defiance. It is this look which the rikishi wields like a weapon at their opponent, at the very moment of confrontation.

Victory or defeat, the eyes decide; each bout is won or lost on moment-by-moment acts of will. These eyes which face the camera are eyes that have fought day after day. They confront the camera, they challenge it on its own /dohyo/.

Thus, we must confront each gaze in each image as if in the photographer's place. Turn the pages; each fight is unique! The shutter falls and the fight is on.

/Hakkeyoi, nokotta!/

And so the sound comes rushing back to me: that terrible thud of impact. In the tiny click of a shutter, I can hear the awesome holy terror of primal combat.

(1)/Dohyo:/ a platform made of straw and covered with hardened clay which constitutes the "ring" where the combat takes place.

(2)/Rikishi/: sumo wrestler.

(3)/Ukiyoe/: "pictures of the floating world," Japanese wood block prints.

(4)/Kesho mawasgu/: a type of embroidered ceremonial apron in the colours of each rikishi.

(5)/Heya/: "training stables" or building where the wrestlers live and train.