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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the important role of Western-style professional wrestling in the popular culture of Japan, focusing on the early years in which it was established, 1953–1963. These were also the years in which television achieved its phenomenal growth, and the symbiotic relationship between the “sport” and the medium is explored.

It is also shown that the great popularity of professional wrestling in Japan is related to its embracing of a powerful theme: Japan against the world, the West, America.

Western-style professional wrestling has an important place in the popular culture of Japan. The spectacle is nationally televised twice a week during prime time hours, not including UHF broadcasts. (Women's professional wrestling is also broadcast weekly.) Wrestlers are celebrities and appear on commercials, in advertisements, and as guests on quiz shows, cooking programs, musical programs, etc. In addition to the broadcast media, a number of so-called “sports” newspapers devote many column inches, screaming headlines and gory pictures to the bouts. (Indeed many of them got started about thirty years ago as pro wrestling sheets.) A glance at the shelves of one large book store in Osaka (Japan's second largest city) revealed about ninety titles on pro wrestling (versus about thirty for sumo.)

This paper documents the popularity of Western-style professional wrestling in Japan, focusing on the early years in which it established its cultural role. This period coincided with the early years of television in Japan. In fact, the relationship between the explosive popularity of the “sport” and the rapid growth of the new medium has been called symbiotic. Therefore the approach of this paper is to focus on that relationship.

Admittedly objections could be raised to treating professional wrestling as a sport. Although it shares many of the outward features of sport—winners and losers, referees, official bodies, commissioners, championships, trophies—there is plenty of doubt about

its inner organization. The matches seem all too obviously staged.

In his study of professional wrestling in the United States Gregory Stone met with a "conspiracy of silence" which prevented him from getting a clear picture of its social organization. As an anonymous wrestler put it, "There is too much money at stake."⁽¹⁾

At any rate, the legitimacy of professional wrestling as a sport is not the topic of this paper. Although I assume it is faked, at the same time I find myself forced to use the terminology of sport, since continually writing "staged victory," "so-called champion" and the like is somewhat cumbersome.

Regardless of its legitimacy as a sport, however, at certain levels of analysis it is the very fraudulence of pro wrestling that makes it of interest to the student of sport. A comparison with pro wrestling can reveal the institutions and processes by which more genuine sports legitimize their results, and the ever-present possibility that the requirement of pleasing the paying customer will take precedence over the purity of the sports activity.

For the purposes of this paper, the very fakery of pro wrestling makes it a more accurate mirror of what kind of drama the fan wants to see. In legitimate sports, the outcome is not fixed, and the desired results are often not attained. The professional wrestling match is a transformation of a legitimate sports event,⁽²⁾ and therefore is more flexible in providing the desired drama.

As a presentation of the drama of confrontation *closely tuned to the needs of the fan*, a study of professional wrestling may be quite productive to the study of sport.

The Rapid Growth of Television in Japan

The first ten or so years of television in Japan have been called the "period of growth."⁽³⁾ Regular broadcasts started in 1953. By March 1963 television broadcasts could be received in 84% of the country.⁽⁴⁾ By the end of 1963 most stations in Tokyo were broadcasting from 16 to 19 hours per day.⁽⁵⁾ By that time there were also 15,153,546 sets in use throughout the country, or a set in 73.4% of all households.⁽⁶⁾ By 1965 the average person spent 2 hours 52 minutes per weekday watching television, not much less than the 3 hours 17 minutes spent in 1980.⁽⁷⁾

The main factor in the growth of television during this period was the high rate of economic growth the country enjoyed. The number of sets increased along with the per capita share of the gross national income.⁽⁸⁾ Obviously, as the average income increased, the number of people who could afford a television also increased.

If rise in income was the only factor, however, then all durable consumer products should have had the same rate of diffusion, only staggered in time. This was not the case. Television had a much more rapid rate of diffusion than any other durable consumer goods. There were people who did not own a sewing machine, washing machine, electric fan, electric rice cooker, electric refrigerator, vacuum cleaner, or kerosene stove, but owned a television set.⁽⁹⁾ According to Yamamoto Toru, co-author of an early study of the growth of television in Japan, "installing a TV set in the living room took precedence over reducing and rationalizing housework for the housewife."⁽¹⁰⁾

Of course, the price of a set also dropped to less than one third during this period, more than any other durable consumer product except transistor radios.⁽¹¹⁾ Yet the drop in price cannot be considered the cause of the rapid diffusion; the two are complementary.

In the words of Yamamoto Toru: "The extraordinarily rapid growth of television was due to the irresistible attraction it held for people. Caught by its charms, they strained the family budget to make a purchase that was really beyond their means. If there had not been such a fascination for television, it would not have achieved the high degree of growth that it has. What was it about television that fascinated people?"⁽¹²⁾

This question still awaits an answer. As McLuhan has most eloquently pointed out,⁽¹³⁾ the impact of a new medium goes beyond its apparent content. The impact of the printing press cannot be measured by analyzing the contents of the Gutenberg Bible. However, it is significant to know that it was the Bible that was printed. In the same way, by looking at what fascinated people during the early years of television in Japan we can get a glimpse of what concerned and involved them during that period.

The Popularity of Professional Wrestling During the Early Years of Television in Japan

The growth of television was slow for the first four years. Its price was far beyond the reach of the average person: three to five times the monthly salary of a middle-level company employee.⁽¹⁴⁾

During these years, the social category of people that owned the most sets was independent businessmen. For example, at the end of June 1955, out of 68,000 sets in use, 44.9% were owned by operators of coffee shops, restaurants, barber shops, public baths, beauty parlors, and other businesses.⁽¹⁵⁾ They used television "as a good way to bring customers in. They hung out signs saying 'Television now being shown!' Their aim was to increase business by attracting customers with television." And what was the most popular program? "Particularly when there was a broadcast of a professional wrestling

match, every shop would be filled to capacity with customers watching television.”⁽¹⁶⁾

The great majority of people who did not own a television had another alternative: the *gaito terebi* (outdoor television). Nihon Television (NTV), the commercial station which started regular broadcasts on August 28, 1953, set up 220 sets at 55 outdoor locations throughout the Kanto region. Their aim was to increase the viewing audience and thereby attract sponsors. By the end of 1954 outdoor sets had been set up in 278 locations.⁽¹⁷⁾

Broadcasts of sporting events drew the largest crowds to these outdoor locations, and in particular broadcasts of professional wrestling matches. Yamamoto Toru describes the scene: “The crowd cheered enthusiastically as their hero, Rikidozan, ruled the ring, mowing down giant foreign wrestlers with his speciality, the karate chop.”⁽¹⁸⁾

In a survey of viewer preference conducted in August 1954, respondents were asked whether they wanted to see each of 44 types of program. The most popular program was feature films (74.1%). The next most popular program was professional wrestling (71.4%). Professional wrestling was the most popular program among males at 82.7%, far ahead of boxing which came in second at 73.4%. Even among females, professional wrestling came in third.⁽¹⁹⁾

An identical survey was conducted six months later in Tokyo-Yokohama, Nagoya, and Osaka. In Nagoya (73.7%) and Osaka (79%) professional wrestling was the most popular program. In Tokyo-Yokohama professional wrestling came in second at 66% to feature films.⁽²⁰⁾

The first survey of actual viewing behavior was conducted at the end of 1955 among non-owners of sets. 29.9% of the respondents said that they had gone out at least once in the previous month specifically for the purpose of watching television. Of those, 80.2% had gone to see professional wrestling. Baseball came in a distant second at 36.1%.⁽²¹⁾

Near the end of this “fetal period” of television, in November 1957, the major advertising agency Dentsu conducted a program rating survey. Professional wrestling came in first among all stations with a rating of 87%.⁽²²⁾

In a survey conducted by Yomiuri Television in January 1959 in the three cities of Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe, professional wrestling had a rating of 65.6%, the highest rating among all the programs of all four stations surveyed. The authors add that the match between the team of Rikidozan and Toyonobori and the team of Simonovitch and Mills “was not even a very important match.”⁽²³⁾

In May of the same year, professional wrestling had a rating of 79.3% in Osaka and Kobe, again the highest rating among all programs of the six stations surveyed.⁽²⁴⁾

In August professional wrestling again came in first with a rating of 72.2% (Dentsu

figure).

In May 1960 professional wrestling had a rating of 63.3% in Osaka and Kobe (Dentsu).

In September of that year, NTV, which at that time had a monopoly on the spectacularly popular professional wrestling broadcasts, conducted a weeklong national ratings survey among the informal network of stations that broadcast its programming. According to that survey, 49.6% of all households owning television sets in the area covered by the network watched the professional wrestling broadcast that week. This was the highest rating of all network programs. The estimated number of households watching was over three million. In second place was a family comedy viewed by 41.3% of the households.⁽²⁵⁾

In a similar survey conducted in March 1961, professional wrestling again came in first, this time with a rating of 60.5%. The estimated number of households viewing was almost five million. In second place was an American detective series at 37.4%⁽²⁶⁾

In a survey conducted by Dentsu in May 1961, professional wrestling again had the highest rating, 68.8%. Second was "Rawhide" at 44.3%, a respectable figure, but not in the same league with professional wrestling.

The newspaper *Tokyo Shinbun* published a list of the top ten programs in the Kanto area for the nine years from 1955 to 1963 according to Dentsu surveys.⁽²⁷⁾ Professional wrestling broadcasts had the highest ratings five times, and the second highest once. It is likely that there were no professional wrestling broadcasts during the survey periods the three years that professional wrestling did not make the top ten.

As the above statistics clearly show, the most popular program of the early days of television was far and away professional wrestling. As Yamamoto Toru wrote in 1965: "When you consider the high ratings that professional wrestling continues to maintain, and the feverish excitement it is greeted with in the countryside as well as the cities, it is hard to overlook the contribution professional wrestling has made to the spread of television."⁽²⁸⁾

A Brief Outline of the History of Professional Wrestling in Japan⁽²⁹⁾

After the opening of the country in the mid-nineteenth century, a few Japanese went abroad and became professional wrestlers. Some returned to Japan with troupes of foreign wrestlers, but never were successful in attracting paying customers. In the early twentieth century wrestlers from abroad came to Japan to challenge Kodokan Judo, but again nothing much came of it.

After World War II there was an unsuccessful attempt to start a professional judo association. Some judoists went abroad to become professional wrestlers.

The first professional wrestling matches in post-war Japan were held in September 1951. At the invitation of the American social service organization Torii Shriners Club, a group including former world boxing champion Joe Louis, former world professional wrestling champion Bobby Brauns, and Japanese-American wrestler Harold Sakata came to Japan to entertain the occupying troops. In order to stir up local interest in the matches, a couple of Japanese were invited to participate.

One of these was Rikidozan, a former sumo wrestler who had risen to the third highest rank of *sekiwake*. Rikidozan decided he had a future in professional wrestling, and with the support of a group headed by his former sumo patron, went to the United States in February 1952 where he trained and toured for a year. On July 1, 1953, he opened the first professional wrestling training gym in Japan, 'Rikidozan Dojo,' in Nihonbashi, Tokyo, and established the Japan Professional Wrestling Association.

Meanwhile, also in July, a judoist who had appeared in the U. S. as a professional wrestler, Yamaguchi Toshio, held a professional wrestling match with former sumo wrestler Kiyomigawa at the Osaka Prefectural Gymnasium. On February 6 and 7, 1954, the two held matches with two American soldiers, one of whom went by the name "Bulldog Butcher," also in Osaka. The matches were broadcast live by the Osaka station of the public broadcasting network Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK), thus becoming the first professional wrestling broadcasts in Japan.

In the meantime Rikidozan had gone to the U. S. again, and on February 12 came back with the NWA world tag team champions, the Sharpe brothers, who stayed for a three-week tour. Of the two television stations in operation at the time, NHK broadcast three and NTV all of the five matches held in Tokyo. Rikidozan and judoist-turned-wrestler Kimura Masahiko teamed up to challenge for the title three times, but were unsuccessful. The project was a big success, however, and ticket sales reportedly reached eighty million yen, a record for a sports event. This is usually reckoned the beginning of professional wrestling in Japan.

Yamaguchi and Kimura had their own professional wrestling organizations, but they could not compete with Rikidozan. They lacked the backing that he had in the political, financial, entertainment, and media circles; they operated outside of Tokyo (Yamaguchi in Osaka, Kimura in Kumamoto); and they lacked a reliable pipeline to talented foreign wrestlers. The last limitation in particular was to prove decisive.

By 1958 Rikidozan had become the sole promoter of professional wrestling in Japan,

and also the biggest star. All competing groups had failed, mostly for lack of reliable routes for bringing over foreign wrestlers.

For it was matches with foreign wrestlers that were the mainstay of professional wrestling in Japan, a condition that continues until today. Preliminary matches may pit Japanese against Japanese, but the main bout is almost always between Japanese and foreigner. In 1954 Rikidozan defeated Kimura for the heavyweight championship of Japan. After defending his title against Yamaguchi early the next year, he never accepted another challenge. In the years until his death in 1963 he faced a steady stream of foreign wrestlers.

Professional Wrestling and the Mass Media

We have already seen the great popularity of professional wrestling broadcasts. In *Studies in Mass Communication* Ikuta Masaki writes,

“It seems the role of professional wrestling in the rapid growth of television cannot be denied. Of course, I by no means intend to suggest that that was the only factor, but in Japan anyway, it is an obvious fact that television and professional wrestling had an intimate relationship.”⁽³⁰⁾

The first televised broadcasts of professional wrestling were on the two days of February 6 and 7, 1954. NHK's Osaka station, conducting test broadcasts before starting regular operation, broadcast the Yamaguchi-Butcher match to an area reaching from the Kansai district to Shizuoka. The Mainichi Newspaper sponsored the bouts. Taniguchi Katsuhisa, former chief of the sports desk at the head office of the Mainichi Newspaper in Osaka and commentator for this first broadcast, recalls the scene.

“On the second day, fans who had been stirred up by coverage of the first day's bout thronged to the gymnasium. The building was filled to overflowing three hours before the matches were to start, and the crowd of fans who couldn't get in spilled over into the street.”⁽³¹⁾

NTV broadcast all five matches with the Sharpe brothers held in Tokyo in February and March 1954. NHK, the only other station operating in Tokyo at the time, broadcast three of the matches. According to NTV, over 150,000 people watched the three bouts in February at 65 outdoor television locations, and over 130,000 watched the two bouts in March.⁽³²⁾

All the stations were eager to carry the obviously popular professional wrestling broadcasts. Of the two stations operating in 1954, NHK broadcast at least fourteen

matches, and NTV at least thirteen. On seven occasions both stations broadcast the same match. In 1955 a third station began operation and joined in the competition to carry professional wrestling broadcasts. At least twice in 1956, all three stations broadcast the same match, professional wrestling thus being the only program shown on all three stations.

In 1957 NTV concluded an exclusive contract with Rikidozan to gain the sole broadcast rights to professional wrestling, and started a one-hour program from five o'clock Saturday evening called "Fightmen Hour" (sic). Mitsubishi Electronics, a major manufacturer of television sets, became the program's sponsor, and continued as such for fifteen years. From January 1959, to "strengthen" the program, foreign wrestlers were made a regular part of the card. By April 1964 26 stations carried the program nation-wide.⁽³³⁾

Television was not the only media to support professional wrestling. It also benefited from newspaper coverage.

The Mainichi Newspaper was an important backer. Most of the major bouts were co-sponsored by the Mainichi. The newspaper created the "Mainichi Cup" and awarded it to the winners of special series. But the most important support of all was the coverage in its columns. In the ten years from the Sharpe brothers' tour in 1954 to Rikidozan's death in 1963 the Mainichi printed around 650 articles and 360 photographs on professional wrestling.

For comparison, another leading newspaper, the Asahi, covered the "sport" only sparsely during the first few years, and not at all from 1958. In 1962 the Asahi printed stories about senior citizens who had died, apparently from heart failure, while watching particularly bloody matches on television, and criticized the violence of professional wrestling.

The "Message" of Professional Wrestling in Japan

NTV and the Mainichi Newspaper were the main media for professional wrestling. How did they view the sport? What was their purpose in covering it, and what message did they intend to send?

Kobayashi Yosajji, former president of NTV, writes:

"Japan in the early 1950's was finally finishing the post-war cleanup. There were signs that things were going to improve, and we were firmly started on the path to reconstruction and rebirth. Along with economic recovery, people were calling for a

revival of the national spirit as well.

"It was at this time that the late Shoriki Matsutaro founded Nihon Television Broadcasting Corporation as a commercial television enterprise to contribute to the cultural revival of the country and thereby give the people confidence as members of the world community.

"Just at that time the sumo 'revolutionary' Rikidozan had thrown himself into professional wrestling and his success there was becoming the talk of the times. Chairman Shoriki believed that by broadcasting Rikidozan's gallant figure to people in every corner of the land he could fulfill the goal of his enterprise of serving society. So thinking, and with Rikidozan's ready consent, the first professional wrestling matches were broadcast on February 19, 1954 (sic)."⁽³⁴⁾

Komatsu Nobuyasu recalls his experience as the first producer of professional wrestling programs for NTV:

"My aim in introducing professional wrestling broadcasts was entirely in accord with the broad policy of Mr. Shoriki. Through professional wrestling, Rikidozan physically expressed the revival of the spiritual confidence of the Japanese."⁽³⁵⁾

Moriguchi Chuzo, then head of operations for the Mainichi, recalls his reaction when asked for the newspaper's backing:

"I thought Rikidozan's future as a professional wrestler was promising. I wanted to help him succeed, and felt this was just the thing to dispel the lethargic mood that had fallen on the youth since the end of the war, and to revive the national spirit."⁽³⁶⁾

It seems the police viewed Rikidozan's professional wrestling in the same way. Tazuhami Hiroshi, an early professional wrestling commentator, writes in *Twenty Years of Professional Wrestling in Japan*:

"Because of the number of accidents that followed in the wake of this explosive popularity, Omori Shigeru, in charge of NTV's outdoor televisions, thought he would have to make written apologies when he made the round of the various police stations (after the first broadcasts). He was surprised to find that at every station, rather than making him write an apology, the police were unexpectedly well-disposed toward the commotion stirred up by professional wrestling. One police chief told him: 'Professional wrestling broadcasts have been the first enhancement of national prestige since the end of the war. They're a national event. Don't worry about a thing. Next time let us know ahead of time. We'll be happy to take care of crowd control for you.'"⁽³⁷⁾

The stated reasons for backing professional wrestling—"bring back courage and confidence," "bring back the pride and self-awareness of the people," "dispel the lethar-

gic mood of the youth"—are probably somewhat superficial. The possibility of making money from the extremely popular professional wrestling would seem like a more likely "real" reason. There is no way to find out about the possible existence of such "real" reasons, however. The stated reasons may belong to a "vocabulary of motives",⁽³⁸⁾ an idea that is supported by statements of the principals in other contexts. In a speech on April 1, 1960, to new employees of NTV, Shoriki said:

"I want you to have pride in being employees of Nihon Television. You shouldn't have the sordid idea that you are employees of Nihon Television just because you receive a salary from this company. Nihon Television is the father of television in Japan. And it was Nihon Television that succeeded in disseminating television all over the country. Therefore this company has greatly contributed to the culture and economy of Japan."⁽³⁹⁾

Have pride in your work, which contributes to the reconstruction of Japan — Shoriki's message to new employees is the same as the reason given for broadcasting professional wrestling.

Various factors contributed to the image of professional wrestling as a "national event." Ono Banboku, vice-president of the ruling Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP), served as Japan Professional Wrestling Commissioner from 1957 to 1964. During this period Narahashi Wataru, former secretary-general of the LDP and former cabinet minister, served as chairman of the Japan Professional Wrestling Association. Tazuhama Hiroshi writes:

"The advantage gained by professional wrestling from the support of these two political bosses — in enhancing its image and giving it social status as a professional sport — was immeasurable."⁽⁴⁰⁾

The legitimacy of professional wrestling was enhanced by other groups as well. The Ministry of Welfare was a sponsor of a series of matches in August and September 1954. The Governor of Tokyo sponsored a match on October 1, 1954, the winner of which was awarded the Governor's Cup. The Boy Scouts of Japan was a sponsor for the "World Championship" match between Rikidozan and Tom Rice on September 1, 1956.

Given the intentions of the "senders" and the official flavor of some of the backers of professional wrestling, what was the reaction of the viewers? We have already made reference to the great popularity of the sport. What did the people see in it? Since the period is already twenty to thirty years in the past, we have to rely on the 'testimony' of people's memories.

First, a fan:

"After being mercilessly beat up and baited by a ferocious-looking foreign wrestler,

the Japanese wrestler in black tights finally ran out of patience. Indignantly rising to his feet with a furious look, he let loose a karate chop. 'Go Riki!' 'That's it!' the crowd shouted at ringside. The fans in front of the outdoor television also went wild. . . . That night, I saw a great man. Fighting spirit embodied in a pair of black tights, that was Rikidozan. He taught me that to win, you have to endure single-mindedly, and when the right time comes, fight like a man, fearlessly and with everything you've got. He didn't just talk about it, he did it, and the professional wrestling of Rikidozan is my goal even today."⁽⁴¹⁾

Journalist Irie Tokuro:

"There was after all the feeling of Japan against America. We may have lost the war, but look how we're doing in professional wrestling. That's the way a lot of people saw it."⁽⁴²⁾

Suzuki Watoshi, producer of the the 1983 movie "The Rikidozan" (sic):

"There was the defeated feeling that the Japanese would never be the equals of the Caucasians. Then the typically Yankee-looking Sharpe brothers. . . came in 1953 (1954) and the physical impact of hitting and throwing, well, to put it one way, it gave us hope and courage for the future of Japan, that kind of thing."⁽⁴³⁾

In these recollections we can detect the sense of a renewal of confidence and morale. Note also that this is accomplished through confrontation with foreigners, in this case Westerners, Caucasians, "Americans."

An NTV publication gives as reasons for the large crowds that gathered to watch the Sharpe brothers the novelty of professional wrestling, the build-up in the media, and the fact that "the confrontational aspects of the match were highlighted by the idea of Japanese against Americans."⁽⁴⁴⁾ Only the latter reason can account for the continued popularity of professional wrestling.

Ushijima Hidehiko, author of a revealing book on Rikidozan and his times, puts it more plainly:

"People overlapped the Sharpe brothers with the occupying American forces, and watching the 'American occupation' get 'sunk' swept away the shock of the defeat and its resulting complexes."⁽⁴⁵⁾

The authors of *A Study of Television Programs* recognize the role of foreigners:

"Rikidozan's karate chops, while cleaning up the foreign wrestlers, at the same time were effective in clearing up Japanese feelings of inferiority to foreigners. 'Okay, so we lost the war, but in one-on-one hand-to-hand combat we won't lose to the likes of you.' Professional wrestling compensated for the inferiority complex of a defeated people. In this way, Rikidozan became an 'ethnic hero.' "⁽⁴⁶⁾

The authors say, however, that the popularity of professional wrestling cannot be explained by nationalism alone. Professional wrestling, they point out, was more “suited to television” than other sports. It is easy to understand, has a built-in dramatic element, and therefore was easily handled by the relatively primitive technology of early television.

While this is certainly true, it is true even without the introduction of foreign wrestlers. But as we have seen, the major bouts were always with foreign wrestlers. This is in contrast to other sports. It seems obvious that professional wrestling gained its popularity by offering to viewers showdowns with foreign athletes.

The Role of the Foreign Wrestler

Professional wrestling was said to be enjoying a revival in Japan in the early 1980's. One of the instigators of that revival, author Muramatsu Tomomi, recalls his first encounter with professional wrestling.

“I was raised near the harbor of Shimizu, and to me, foreigner meant someone big and strong. The wharf swarmed with foreign sailors, and we children were frightened by their size. I saw television for the first time at the electronics shop at the end of the wharf, and on the screen was a man raining karate chops on a huge foreigner. If that didn't astound you, nothing would. It was really an unbelievable sight.”⁽⁴⁷⁾

Foreign wrestlers always played the ‘villain.’ “In those days, being a foreigner (American) just meant being a villain (heel) to most people. Whether the Sharpe brothers did anything bad or not, they were bad just because they were foreigners,” writes Muramatsu.⁽⁴⁸⁾

The following excerpt from a Mainichi account of a match provides an example of the distribution of roles.

“The match got under way when Jonathan suddenly attacked Rikidozan from behind before the gong with a dropkick followed by punches to the face. In a flash Rikidozan's face was bathed in blood. Jonathan continued to dish out the rough stuff with all his strength, applying tricky illegal holds right up to the count, trying to wear Rikidozan down. Rikidozan, however, fought fairly. Creating openings with karate chops to Jonathan's neck and abdomen, he repeatedly came close to pinning him with favorite holds such as the armlock, single-leg, and reverse lobster. In the latter part of the match Jonathan missed a dropkick and Rikidozan pinned him for the first fall. After that, Jonathan visibly tired, and Rikidozan was content to wait out the rest of the match, shrugging off Jonathan's

ineffective random blows, and sometimes responding to the crowd with a karate chop.”⁽⁴⁹⁾

In contemporary newspaper accounts there are some expressions that border on racial slurs.

“The Sharpe brothers, who look more like wild beasts than men.”⁽⁵⁰⁾

“The ‘Mammoth’ with chest hair of wire.”⁽⁵¹⁾

“Sky High Lee looks like Godzilla come out of the movies.”⁽⁵²⁾

“The spring in his legs peculiar to Negroes, his cold, tanned—looking skin, and his eerily glaring eyes make one think of a black panther from the jungle.”⁽⁵³⁾

The last quote refers to Bobo Brazil, perhaps the first black wrestler to come to Japan. In his 1975 book *Tazuhamas* Hiroshi emphasizes the racial aspects even more:

“His huge, jet—black body gleamed all over with a mysterious black light. His eyes, like headlights out of the darkness, had a devilish ghastliness. His scarlet trunks and palms were the only color against the jet black. Lurking in the red and black gloom was the wordless threat of his frightful head butt.”⁽⁵⁴⁾

Typical promotional fare, perhaps, but similar expressions were not used to describe Rikidozan or the other Japanese wrestlers.

In this way a clear distinction was made between foreign and Japanese wrestlers, and the basic plot of Japanese professional wrestling — the ‘good guy’ Japanese wrestlers versus the ‘bad guy’ foreigners — was established. And the good guys were led by Rikidozan.

Rikidozan — The ‘Ethnic Hero’

Rikidozan, by beating up foreign wrestlers with his speciality, the karate chop, became the ‘ethnic hero’ of Japan. During his ten—year career in Japan the *Mainichi* printed over 450 titled articles on professional wrestling. Over half of those, about 230, had “Rikidozan” or other diminutive forms in the title. The wrestler whose name appeared the next most often was Azumafuji, a former grand champion of sumo, who managed only 31 appearances. These figures reflect the dominating presence of Rikidozan.

We have already heard from the man who learned his ‘life’s goal’ from watching Rikidozan. Another fan says, “When Rikidozan died, it was more of a shock to me than when the American president Kennedy was assassinated.”⁽⁵⁵⁾

No treatment of the role of pro wrestling in Japan would be complete without including a most startling fact: Rikidozan was not Japanese. This opens up a whole new

can of worms, not all of which can be disposed of in this paper.

Rikidozan was a former sumo wrestler from the Nishonozeki stable who had risen to the third highest rank of *sekiwake*. He was popular and his future looked bright, but on the evening of September 2, 1950, he cut off his topknot with a fish knife at his home, abruptly ending his sumo career. So a year later, when he was invited to participate in exhibition matches with wrestlers from the U. S., he was already well-known.

Contemporary newspaper accounts give his birthplace as Omura City, Nagasaki Prefecture. The "Who's Who" dictionaries also agree with this story.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Contemporary "biographies" carry accounts of his days as a student at a primary school in Omura.

However, in a book published in 1978, fifteen years after his death, the true story was revealed.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Rikidozan was born in 1925 of Korean parents on the Korean peninsula, then a Japanese colony. He was scouted around 1940 by a Japanese sumo fan and sent to the Nishonozeki stable run by Tamanoumi Umekichi, a native of Omura City. Tamanoumi figured that it was not a good idea to have a sumo wrestler registered in Korea, so he arranged to have the boy adopted by a patron and a man of influence in Omura City.

A large number of Koreans came to Japan during the colonial period; according to some sources there were more than two million at the end of World War II. The majority eventually returned to the peninsula, but a large number ended up staying in Japan because of the subsequent international situation.

These Koreans face discrimination and prejudice in Japan, as do minorities in many countries. Koreans, however, are physically indistinguishable from Japanese. To avoid discrimination most choose to "pass" as Japanese, at least in some situations, which for most purposes is as simple as adopting a Japanese alias.⁽⁵⁸⁾

There are many Koreans in sports and entertainment in Japan. Although there are prominent exceptions, the large majority of them prefer to hide their origins from the public.

Many people, especially those who knew him from his early days in sumo, knew Rikidozan was Korean. However, although all the reporters covering professional wrestling knew, none ever wrote about it. As one former reporter put it, "There was an atmosphere which prohibited writing anything that Rikidozan would not like, and Rikidozan had to be Japan's Rikidozan."⁽⁵⁹⁾

Since this information did not appear in the media (indeed the papers reported his birthplace as Nagasaki) the vast majority of people must not have known. It seems unlikely that a known Korean, given the low esteem in which Koreans were generally held, could have served as the "ethnic hero" of Japan. In an admittedly limited survey taken

in September 1951, Koreans ranked 15th out of 16 given races (nationalities) in order of preference. 44% of respondents gave Koreans as a people they particularly disliked.⁽⁶⁰⁾ In a similar survey conducted in the mid-60's Koreans came in 12th out of 13.⁽⁶¹⁾

The enigma is evident in the following comments by a chronicler of professional wrestling in Japan, Tazuhami Hiroshi.

"In 1953 and 1954, the remains of the war destruction were still in evidence. The Japanese had an immeasurable complex toward, to say nothing of Caucasians, even third party nationals (*daisankokumin*, a contemporary term for Chinese and Koreans). There was even the self-derogatory term 'a fourth-class people.' "⁽⁶²⁾

According to this view, the Japanese people had feelings of inferiority not only toward Caucasians, but toward Chinese and Koreans as well (the expression "even Chinese and Koreans" retains a blatantly derogatory nuance). That being the case, the Japanese, having a complex towards Koreans as well, should have gotten no comfort from seeing a Korean beat up Caucasians.

Rikidozan had to be Japanese.

Some Concluding Remarks

Many authors have commented that sports can have the functions of integration and pattern maintenance, to use Parsonian terms.⁽⁶³⁾ In international competition, the effect is to distinguish "us" from "them." Each group, however, has its own "them." "They" do not necessarily share a common identity and "they" may not consider "us" a "them" in return. Each group's perceived "them" is an outcome of the historical experience of the group and its perceived current international position.⁽⁶⁴⁾

According to one student of sport, although international competition has not traditionally received much of the American sports fan's attention, when it does, "the victors over talented Americans are often seen as symbolic representatives of the enemy, rival ideology of international Communism."⁽⁶⁵⁾ In Japan, however, what divides "us" from "them" is not ideology, but race, and to some degree geography. Japan's rival in international competition, in sports as in other spheres, is the "West," as it has been for the last 120 years since the opening of the country.

As mentioned earlier, professional wrestling has a dramatic advantage over more genuine sports. It can readily adapt to and satisfy the needs of its audience. This is probably the reason it survives despite continual doubts about its legitimacy.

Indeed, Gregory Stone has said that "the major task of the established professional

wrestler is identity—work —— building and husbanding an identity that can mobilize the appreciations of the audience and maintain them over time.”⁽⁶⁶⁾ Stone, writing in the 1960s, mentions the following themes of pro wrestling in America: the class or status struggle, the conflict between beauty and ugliness, the battle between the sexes, antagonism between local provincialism and cosmopolitan sophistication, and the “cold war.” Unlike Japanese pro wrestling, international concerns are not the major dramatic elements of pro wrestling in America. And the current mixture of “Russian,” “Arab,” and “Oriental” wrestlers shows that international concerns, when they do figure, are not as sharply focused.

The phenomenal popularity of pro wrestling in Japan owes much to its embracing of a single, powerful theme: Japan against the world: the West (America). It makes no difference now that, according to prevailing perceptions, Rikidozan was really Korean. (The Sharpe brothers were actually Canadian.) This “fact” does not change the much more powerful fact that a generation of Japanese, feeling humbled and humiliated by defeat in a war into which many of them had invested a great amount of personal pride, got to see one of their own defeat the supposed victors in one-on-one combat. Revelation of the former fact will never eliminate the experience of the latter. Revelation of the former fact is just another event in the media, available to the experience of another generation.

Professional wrestling is a ripe example of what Geertz has termed “metasocial commentary.”⁽⁶⁷⁾ Geertz saw in the Balinese cockfight a Balinese interpretation of Balinese experience. Japanese professional wrestling is one interpretation of Japanese experience by the Japanese themselves. It provides a succinct model of an extant perception of relations with foreigners and foreign countries. This model is then available for reflexive “illustration” of those relations, as in the following two political cartoons.

Fig.1



The first cartoon appeared after yet another near-breakdown in negotiations with America over agricultural import quotas, particularly beef and oranges.⁽⁶⁸⁾ A worn-out Yamamura Shinjiro, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, is resting in his corner with his “seconds,” Foreign Minister Abe Shintaro and Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, while the brawny foreign wrestler, wearing a cow mask, waits in the center of the ring, ready for more. The caption reads, “Against Beef Mask . . . ‘Maybe we need a new strategy.’ ”

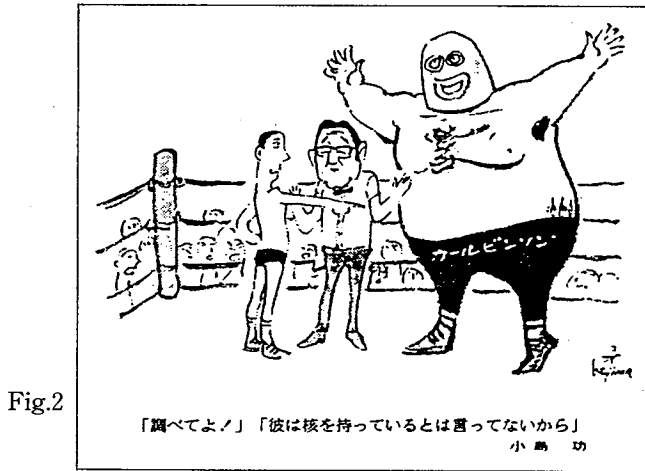


Fig.2

The second cartoon appeared during the controversy over the docking of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier “Carl Vinson.”⁽⁶⁹⁾ Japanese government policy forbids nuclear weapons in Japanese territory, but the U. S. government will not comment on whether a particular vessel carries nuclear weapons at a particular time. The Japanese government publicly assumes that since they have not been otherwise informed, no nuclear weapons have been brought into the country, but many Japanese believe they are brought in secretly.

The cartoon shows the Japanese wrestler demanding that the huge foreigner (“Carl Vinson” written on his black tights) be searched. The referee, Foreign Minister Abe, refuses to comply, explaining, “He hasn’t said he is carrying any nukes.” The missiles are visible sticking up out of wrestler’s waistband.

The above two cartoons are examples of professional wrestling providing an interpretive setting for Japan’s relations with foreign countries.

In Japanese media coverage of international sports competition, similar themes can be found, but not in as pure a form as with professional wrestling. Of course all groups have their defining adversaries. In this paper professional wrestling in Japan was explored to establish the confrontation displayed therein.

Notes

1. Gregory Stone, "Wrestling: The Great American Passion Play," in Eric Dunning, ed., *The Sociology of Sport* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1971), pp. 309–310.
2. In Goffman's terms, the transformation is probably closer to a fabrication than a keying. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974).
See also Lee Thompson "Puroresu no fureimu bunseki" (A frame analysis of pro wrestling) *Shakai to Shakaigaku* (Society and Sociology) No.3 (May, 1986), Japan: Shinhyoron.
3. NHK Yoron Chosajo (NHK Public Opinion Research Institute), *Terebi shicho no 30 nen* (30 years of television viewing), (Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, 1983), p. 10.
4. Ikuta Masaki, Sato Tomo'o, Tsujimura Akira, Hirai Ryutaro, and Yamamoto Toru, "Nihon ni okeru terebi fukyu no tokushitsu" (Characteristics of the diffusion of television in Japan), *Hosogaku Kenkyu* 8 (1965): p. 64.
5. Ikuta, et. al., 9 (1965): p. 102.
6. Ikuta, et. al., 8, p. 38. This figure is the number of households with reception contracts with NHK. The actual number of sets exceeds the number of contracts, since some people avoid making the contract and thereby paying the fees on which NHK is supposed to operate. But NHK is pretty thorough, and number of contracts is a good index of number of sets. Percentage is computed from national census.
7. NHK Yoron Chosajo, *Showa 55 Nendo Kokumin Seikatsu Jikan Chosa: Zenkokohen* (1980 Survey of Uses of Time), (Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, 1981).
8. Ikuta, et. al., 10 (1965): p. 19.
9. Keizai Kikakucho (Economic Planning Agency), *Kokumin Seikatsu Hakusho* (Livelihood White Paper), 1963, p. 195.
10. Ikuta, et. al., 8, p. 112.
11. Ibid., p. 113.
12. Ibid., p. 82.
13. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw–Hill Book Company; Signet Books, 1964), pp. 33–34.
14. Nihon Hoso Kyokai, *Hoso 50 nenshi: Honhen* (50 years of broadcasting: Main text), (Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, 1977) pp. 388–389.
15. Ibid., p. 389.
16. Ikuta, et. al., 8: 79.
17. Nihon Hoso Kyokai, *50 nenshi*, p. 390.
18. Ikuta, et. al., 8: p. 130.
19. "Terebi shichosha wa donna bangumi o konomu ka" (What kind of programs do viewers prefer?) *NHK Bunken Geppo*, October 1954, pp. 18–21.
20. Ikuta, et. al., 8: p. 83.
21. *NHK Nenkan*, 1957, p. 312.
22. Tokyo Shinbun, July 21, 1963. In Ikuta, et. al., 10, pp. 240–241.
23. "Terebi bangumi no oza o shimeru sports" (Sports: on the 'throne' of television programming), *YTV Report* 1 (April 1959), pp. 18–20.
24. "Osaka rokkyoku best ten no ugoki" (The best ten programs of the six stations in Osaka), *YTV Report* 2 (June 1959), pp. 38–39.
25. "Zenkoku netto bangumi dewa donna mono ga ninki ga aru ka" (What programs are popular on the national network?) *YTV Report: TV Data Book '61* (1961), p. 18.

26. Ibid.
27. Ikuta, et. al, 10, p. 240.
28. Ikuta, et. al., 9, pp. 154–155.
29. The following outline is based on Tazuhama Hiroshi, *Nihon puroresu 20 nenshi* (Twenty years of professional wrestling in Japan), (Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Ami, 1975); Ushijima Hidehiko, *Shinso kairyu no otoko: Rikidozan* (Tokyo: Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1978); and the Mainichi and Asahi newspapers, 1950–1964.
30. Ikuta Masaki, *Mass Communication no Kenkyu* (Studies in Mass Communication) (Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, 1977), p.145.
31. Tazuhama, p. 206.
32. Nihon Hoso Kyokai, *Hoso 50 nenshi: Shiryohen* (Fifty years of broadcasting: Data book) (Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai, 1977), p. 323.
33. Ikuta, et. al., 9, p. 154.
34. Kobayashi Yosanj, “Jo ni kaete” (In place of a preface), in Tazuhama, p. 17.
35. Komatsu Nobuyasu, “Hiwa: puroresu to terebi” (The secret history of professional wrestling and television), in Tazuhama, p. 193.
36. Tazuhama, p. 181.
37. Ibid., p. 212.
38. C. Wright Mills, “Situating Actions and Vocabularies of Motive,” in *Power, Politics and People*, ed. Irving Horowitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 439–452.
39. Shoriki Matsutarō, “Nihon no bunka to keizai e no koken: radio kara color television made” (Contributing to the economy and culture of Japan: from radio to color television), *YTV Report* 8 (May 1960), p. 2.
40. Tazuhama, p. 185.
41. Yomiuri Television, “Watashi to television” (Television and I), 21 April, 1982.
42. Mainichi Hoso, “Za puroresu: ‘Kimi wa Rikidozan o mita ka. Ima yomigaeru fumetsu no osha’” (Professional wrestling: “Have you seen Rikidozan? The return of the indestructible king”), 30 July, 1983.
43. Ibid.
44. *Taishu to tomo ni 25 nen* (Twenty–five years with the people) (Tokyo: Nihon Terebi Hoso Ami, 1978), p. 71.
45. Ushijima, p. 126.
46. Nakamura Shoichi, Tsuganezawa Toshihiro, Inoue Shun, Uchida Akihiro, and Inoue Hiroshi, *Terebi bangumi ron: miru taiken no shakaishinrishi* (A study of television programs: a social psychological history of the viewing experience) (Tokyo: Yomiuri Terebi Hoso Kabushiki Kaisha, 1972), p. 116.
47. Muramatsu Tomomi, *Dirty heroism sengen* (Dirty heroism proclamation) (Tokyo: Joho Center Shuppan Kyoku, 1981), p. 57.
48. Ibid., p. 61.
49. Mainichi Shinbun, 3 October, 1958.
50. Ibid., 27 February 1954.
52. Ibid., 5 September 1958.
53. Ibid., 14 August 1957.
54. Tazuhama, p. 89.
55. Nakamura, et. al., p. 112.
56. *Dai Jinmei Jiten* (Heibonsha, 1958); *Gendai Jinmei Jiten* (Asahi Shinbunsha, 1977).
57. Ushijima Hidehiko first “broke” the story in his 1978 book, on which the following paragraph in the

- text is based. In saying that Rikidozan was "Korean" I am applying the standards of the majority of Japanese, for whom being Japanese is not a matter of legal citizenship. William Wetherall, in his discussion of Rikidozan in Lee and Devos, *Koreans in Japan* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981, pp. 281–303) takes the legalistic view that Japanese citizenship makes one Japanese.
58. See Harold Garfinkel's discussion of "Agnes" for an interesting discussion of "passing." *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1967) pp. 116–207.
 59. Inode Koya, "Tsuiseki! Rikidozan" (On the trail of Rikidozan), *Number*, April 5, 1983, p. 14.
 60. Izumi Seiichi, "Nihonjin no jinshu teki henken" (Racial prejudice in Japan), *Sekai*, March 1963, pp. 80–89.
 61. Wagatsuma Hiroshi and Yoneyama Toshinao, *Henken no kozo: Nihonjin no jinshukan* (Tokyo: NHK Books, 1967) pp. 115–140.
 62. Tazuhama, p. 211.
 63. For just one example, see Gunther Luschen, "The Interdependence of Sport and Culture," *International Review of Sport Sociology*, 1969, 2, p. 136.
 64. Alan Clarke and John Clarke, " 'Highlights and Action Replays' — Ideology, Sport and the Media," in Jennifer Hargreaves, ed., *Sport, Culture and Ideology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) p. 66.
 65. Richard Mandell, *Sport: A Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) pp. 235–236. According to James Riordan ("Sport and Communism — On the Example of the USSR," in Jennifer Hargreaves, ed., op. cit., p. 228), in this case the view is reciprocated.
 66. Stone, p. 318.
 67. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) p. 448.
 68. Asahi Shinbun, 8 April 1984.
 69. Asahi Shinbun, 11 December 1984.