*Culture in Transition*

# Women in the Ring

Kamata Satoshi

PROFESSIONAL, Western-style women's wrestling is very popular among young women in Japan these days. Their cheering makes matches intense and euphoric, the ring as the vortex of the excitement. During intermission, the wrestlers may suddenly turn into songsters with the ring as their stage, the audience tossing confetti and colored streamers. Photograph collections of the stars are sold to fans throughout the country and when women's wrestling matches are held in large cities, they are often telecast during prime time hours with high ratings.

The popularity of women's wrestling suddenly burgeoned about 10 years ago when two very strong young women, the famous Beauty Pair, came into the limelight. After that the novelty seems to have worn off, but a new wave of women's wrestling fever is building today, this time led by another dynamic pair called the Crush Gals: Lioness Asuka, 21, and Nagayo Chigusa, 19. Most of the wrestlers have professional names, as is common in the entertainment business in Japan, but used in Western order.

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How could a sport that was considered little removed from striptease shows only a decade or two ago, have gained such popularity? In order to find out, I joined the women's wrestling company on its tour in the northeastern part of the country.

A typical match on the tour is that held in a gymnasium located on the outskirts of a country town in Akita Prefecture. Some 800 people, mostly sunburnt rice farmers in from working in their fields, have gathered by 6:30 in the evening. "And now! Ladies and gentlemen, a historic fight begins," cries the announcer, and a gong sets off the action in the ring. The spectators are silent, a mixture of breathless anticipation and dismay shifting across their faces as they watch the two tank-suited women in the ring. The opening match is between Tamura Kumiko, 15, and Komatsu Mika, 17. It is almost painful to watch them throwing, kicking, and slamming each other into the ropes.

Before I saw women's wrestling for myself, I imagined it would be grotesque and too ugly to watch, but I soon saw that it is a skillfully run show. The wrestlers play their parts with a toughness and dedication that impresses spectators both around the ring and in front of TV screens. Their profes-

sionalism is admirable. They challenge their physical limits with just as much or more seriousness as men wrestlers. The Crush Gals have also become famous for singing and dancing, using adapted karate stances, at half time. Their songs have been recorded and are sold commercially.

### Family Monopoly

Behind all the show, the hype, and the women who fight is the All Japan Women's Pro-Wrestling Promotion company, run by the large Matsunaga family. Selling promotional T-shirts, calendars, writing pads, autographed placards, and records at a stall at the entrance to the hall is Matsunaga Kenji, 49, the second brother and managing director of the company. It is he who circulates among the spectators, selling rolls of colored paper streamers for a small sum. Then after half time he is in the ring, acting as referee, and going by the professional name of Mister Guo. And, come to think of it, he looks rather Chinese, as the name suggests. But he is not so much referee as provoker, urging on the wrestlers in quiet tones: "Come on, hold your ground. Show'em, girl."

Matsunaga Kunimatsu, 43, the fourth brother, is a handsome, young-looking man who acts as chief referee, using the ring name Jimmy Kayama. He is executive director of the company. The fifth brother, Toshikuni, 40, is supervisor of the referees as well as a director of the company. The president is the third brother, Takashi, 48. Thus, I discovered, women's professional wrestling in Japan is run by only one company; it is a family concern. The wrestlers are their employees. The same people set up the ring and the hall, sell promotional items, referee the fighting, and pack up the show when it is over.

It came rather as a surprise to me to find that this family business represents the whole of women's professional wrestling in Japan. There are no rival companies or organizations. Eighteen female wrestlers work for the company, including a number of trainees. On the tour I accompanied, three had remained behind in Tokyo because of illness and other reasons. The total number of employees is 45.

When the matches end in that Akita town, the family and their assistants begin clearing the hall. In 30 or 40 minutes the gymnasium has returned to its former state. The 15 wrestlers, who so few minutes before were ferociously bashing each other, board the company's large bus, sitting together and chatting amiably. Even the young women who played that day's villains set aside their hostility and aggression. The driver of the bus is 24-year-old Ujiie Kiyoharu, who only moments before was sitting before the microphone in bow tie and striped shirt, acting as ring announcer.

They keep a busy schedule, as I found on the Tohoku tour. Transporting themselves and all their paraphernalia in two trucks and a bus, they set off for five days, circulating from one city to the next without pause throughout the region. The first location was in Aomori Prefecture—about 600 kilometers from Tokyo—on the northern tip of Japan's main island. On the sixth day they returned to Tokyo where matches were scheduled the same day. The following day they held matches in a suburban location, the show beginning promptly at 6:30.

The morning after the matches in Akita, we leave our inn at 10:30 to board the bus for the next location. The bus is 12 meters long, originally intended for 60 passengers. The Matsunagas have remodeled its interior so that the 35 troupe members can ride in comfort. The barking and playing of three puppies, pets of some of the wrestlers, create quite a din, but the swaying vehicle soon grows quiet. The wrestlers doze, their seat backs lowered. Clothes racks, with still damp T-shirts and underwear hung up to dry, swing from the window frames.

Fourth brother Kunimatsu, executive director, tells me he wants to get a double-decker bus for the tours, but the ¥80 million ($333,000) price tag is rather steep. Their current bus cost ¥20 million ($83,000), and the fact that they can even toy with the idea of purchasing a vehicle for four times that amount simply shows how popular their business has become recently. Kunimatsu says offhand that the company has a cumulative deficit of over ¥100 million ($417,000), implying that it is not a significant amount.

The All Japan Women's Pro-Wrestling Promotion company was founded in June 1968 by the four Matsunaga brothers with a capital of ¥1 million ($4,200). The oldest brother, who runs an electric appliance store, declined to join the company, but the second brother, Kenji, left a good job managing a factory affiliated with Sony Corp. Two sisters of the family, who were among the wrestlers who took part in the first international women's wrestling matches held in Japan in 1954, also joined.

Men's professional wrestling became very popular in Japan in the 1950s with the appearance of Rikidōzan, an ex-sumo wrestler. Women's professional wrestling appeared mostly in nightclubs or cabarets and was long looked down on as little better than striptease. For some years after the company got started, it could not find enough wrestlers and had to recruit from among relatives. The wives of two brothers, Takashi and Kunimatsu, are both ex-wrestlers. Even a son of the oldest brother, whose family is not involved with the company, married a popular wrestler, Mimi Hagiwara. There is probably no other industry in Japan that is so completely monopolized by a professional family.

The bus moves southward for four hours, pulling up finally at a gymnasium in a medium-sized city in Yamagata Prefecture. The troupe quickly leaves the bus and begins the familiar routine of arranging the hall. They cover the middle of the floor with vinyl sheets, bring in the boards and mats, and set up the ring. Others rapidly arrange more than 1,000 steel chairs around it.

### Equality With Men

I interview the Crush Gals, Lioness Asuka and Nagayo Higusa. Their first comment is "I want to go back to Tokyo." They have been constantly on the road for several years, and now, only a few days away from home, they are eager to get back. Tours of remote areas such as Tohoku, they say, are somewhat deflating, since the fans are not nearly as enthusiastic as in the big city. Most of the spectators are middle-aged or older people and a kind of pall seems to hang over the halls during their matches in such areas. Besides, they tell me, they have injuries and want to get back to Tokyo for treatment.

Lioness Asuka was separated from her father when a little child. In adolescence she developed a complex because of her tendency to be overweight. Then she saw a women's professional wrestling program on television and realized that there was a world where even large, fat girls could live an exciting life. She immediately decided that wrestling was the perfect career for her and left high school only six months after entering to wait for the opportunity to audition.

Lioness says her mother was surprised to hear her making jokes when she returned home after one year as a professional wrestler. Before she had always been a quiet, grim girl. "I shudder to think what would have happened to me if I had not entered women's wrestling," she says. She has been working constantly for several months, without so much as a single day off. The number of matches she plays is increasing and her work as a singer has grown too.

Nagayo Chigusa is a young woman who hates being outdone by men. In the sixth

grade she got in a fight with a boy classmate; she can't bear it, she says, when people say girls shouldn't do this or that. Such discrimination is inexcusable, she declares. Her goal was to surpass men. She saw the Beauty Pair on television at the peak of their popularity and thought that their strength and the gleam in their eyes was far superior to men's. Her father wanted her to be a speedboat racer as he had been, but she had her own way in the end.

"We want to give our fans hope," says Nagayo, "just as the Beauty Pair gave it to us. Then they in turn will pass it on to the next generation." Implying that she no longer detests men quite as intensely as before, she says she seeks equality with men. At 19 she seems to spend little time thinking of marriage. She is free and independent. Eighty percent of her fan mail comes from girls, many of whom beg the wrestling stars to show them that women can be strong and famous as many like to dream. One letter goes as follows.

"I really like professional wrestling. In fact, I think I'm in love with it. Someday I too will seek stardom in the ring and show everyone who I am. I have only seen you on TV, but I can tell you are trying to get stronger. I want to be strong too. Wrestling is a fighting art I want to make a part of my life. I want to fight until my body is completely worn out. I know it is hard; I know that you risk your very life."

Nagayo makes about ¥300,000 ($1,250) a month. Her left knee has been badly battered, as has Lioness' right knee. When the interview ends, Lioness gets to her feet with a groan, holding a hand to her painful lower back. Often, to add to the excitement of matches, wrestlers leap out of the ring and swing chairs around. Lioness frequently suffers from bone fractures. Once, she says, she was beaten with a bucket and bled badly. Another time she suffered a cut on her thigh that required nine stitches.

### Jaguar and Devil

I also talk with Jaguar Yokota, 23, and Devil Masami, 22. Jaguar, whose real name is Rimi, was born in the old quarter of Tokyo, one of four girls, and her mother separated from their father when they were all still small. As a junior high school student she wanted to be different from other girls. She passed the entrance examination to senior high school, but heard on television that applications were invited for tryouts in women's professional wrestling and did not go on in school.

Very plain-spoken, Jaguar has none of the ingratiating coyness of most Japanese women. Her answers to my questions are forthright and uncompromising, perhaps reflecting the self-confidence she has acquired after hard training as a wrestler. She has been a professional wrestler for eight years, the longest career of any of her associates. Although small, 160 centimeters tall and weighing only 60 kilograms, Jaguar is a world champion.

"These days there are more and more girl fans who scream and carry on a lot, but somehow I think the atmosphere is different than in the days of the Beauty Pair. Back then fans reacted most wildly only when the wrestlers were beautiful or when they would sing. Today more fans come to watch the wrestling itself. After all, this is professional fighting, and if the fans come only to see matches because we sing, it would be pointless."

Devil Masami too is a tough and seasoned professional. Of the women who entered professional wrestling seven years ago, she and another woman are the only two still working. Once she had her breastbone broken and the doctor said it would take a month to mend, but she says she only took two days off. She too comes from a broken family; her parents were divorced when she was still little.

"Have I no worries? Of course I do," she

says. "I am a woman, and I want to marry and have children. In this work I might damage my pelvis and never be able to have a child; even worse, I might get killed."

Many of her fans are male company employees. Perhaps they like her, she says with a smile, because of the vicarious satisfaction they derive from seeing her attack a villain with a wooden sword. Maybe it gives them courage to think that if a snip of a woman can be that tough, so can they.

Most women wrestlers retire at 25, having reached the limit of their physical endurance. After retirement, Devil Masami tells me, she wants to run a coffee shop or snack bar. Her yearly income is around ¥10 million ($42,000), but she has few savings. She spends a lot on medical treatment and has to furnish her own outfits—gowns, tank suits, and boots. Food expenses are also large.

Of ex-wrestlers who have married, only half are said to be happy. Most of the women in wrestling have little time in their hard schedules to go out on dates or socialize with men. More often than not they marry hastily, without knowing men in general very well and being little prepared for the realities of married life.

### The Price of Independence

One of the recurring words throughout the interviews with the wrestlers was "the company." Most of them entered the Matsunaga employ at the age of 15, soon after finishing the compulsory nine years of education. Their days begin and end with the company. Their home is a company dormitory and they stay at inns with the other staff while on tour. Between one match and the next they travel together on the bus, their wash dangling from clothes racks as they go. The bus is their home on the road and the home of women's professional wrestling in Japan. The harder they strive in the ring, the greater the popularity of women's wrestling becomes and the more the company thrives.

Dump Matsumoto is a 23-year-old who takes the part of the villain in the wrestling spectacle. Her role is to inflame the spectator's sense of righteousness. Leaning heavily on a younger, frail-looking wrestler with all her 95 kilograms, attacking the Crush Gals with a chair or hitting them on the head with a beer can, she causes a furor that arouses the spectators to a fever pitch of excitement.

Fresh from a bath, without any makeup on, Dump looks girlish—hardly the villain. "I became big and fat like this after entering the company," she excuses herself. When she was in junior high school, the wrestler Mach Fumiake was popular, and Dump strongly identified with her. She finished high school and found a job in a cake shop, but appeared there only on the first day. In the meantime she had passed a tryout to become a professional wrestler.

The use of villain wrestlers is part of the company's policy of showmanship. She has been told not to lose weight—that's also part of their policy. She and another heavyweight, Crane Yū, make up a part of the show. The team is so successful and convincing that sometimes "fans" send letters that contain a sharp razor, obviously implying, "You should kill yourself with this." Still Dump says she likes her role. She does not care when she is reviled by the fans; it is her job to play the villain. It has its advantages too, she says, and gives her greater freedom in the ring.

If a veteran wrestler took on a new, young contender seriously, she could beat her soundly in a minute. But for the company and for women's wrestling as a whole to prosper, it is her job to exercise careful control, making her younger sister wrestlers look strong and grooming them for future stardom.

How can these women stay on good terms when they are constantly kicking and smashing at each other in the ring? The

wrestlers I interviewed told me that because they were really good friends it made it possible for them to beat each other all the harder. After all, it is for the sake of the company—it is their business.

Jumbo Hori, 22, was dragging her left leg as she boarded the bus. The previous day I had seen the other wrestlers clustered around her after the show was over, apologizing with concerned faces. All of them were covered with bruises and cuts. That is the price of their hard-won independence and liberation.

At the end of the Tohoku tour, the wrestlers return to Tokyo, that most eagerly awaited destination. Korakuen Hall is filled with 2,500 excited spectators. Eight out of ten are junior or senior high school students, and of these, seven out of ten are girls.

I approach a group of teenage fans for comments. When I ask if they are interested in men's professional wrestling they frown and say that men's wrestling is dirty and the action slow. Women wrestlers are attractive, tough-looking, light-footed, and strong. They are real, and their physical agility is convincing. To see them crashing into each other with very real violence and physicality, the fans say, makes the delicate female singers so popular on television look like fragile shams. Many students and working people find their schools and workplaces suffocatingly confining, and women's professional wrestling offers a vicarious experience that makes them feel the contradictions in their daily lives can be overcome.

The wrestlers come out. Thunderous cheering greets their appearance; the excitement of the fans peaks when the Crush Gals sing at half time. The floor of the ring is buried in a flood of paper streamers.