



# Sister Cities



## Japan's Big Boys

**By Catherine Reid, assistant English teacher in Latrobe City's sister city of Takasago**

For foreigners, sumo wrestling represents a cultural side of Japan that must be experienced at some point, particularly if living in Japan for some time. Sumo offers a rare insight into one of many traditional aspects that hopefully Japan never loses. I recently had the opportunity to attend a sumo tournament in Osaka but having only a little understanding of the sport, I was prompted to do a little research before I attended.

It is thought that sumo was first performed in Japan in 453 by Chinese wrestlers at the funeral of a Japanese Emperor. The earliest forms of sumo have been documented as far back as the 8th century when there were few rules and the unarmed wrestlers often fought to the death. There was also a strong association with Shinto religious ceremonies, many of which are still performed today. In the 16th century the use of the 'dohyo' (ring) was first introduced for tournaments. The original sumo wrestlers are thought to have been Samurai warriors.

The dohyo is made from a mixture of clay and sand. It is 34 - 60cms high with a diameter of 4.55m. It is bounded by tawara (rice-straw bales) which are partially buried in the dohyo. Around the outside of the ring there is a fine layer of lightly brushed sand to determine whether a wrestler has touched the outside of the ring. In the centre there are shikiri-sen (two white lines) which the wrestlers stand behind to make their charge at each other. Wrestlers (referred to as rishiki) wear only a silk loin cloth during a fight. It is approximately 9m long and 60cms wide. It is folded in six parts and wrapped around the waist four to seven times depending on the size of the wrestler. Sumo hairstyles, fashionable in the Edo Period (1603-1867), resemble a ginko leaf but also act as a form of head protection if a rishiki was to fall during a fight.

Sumo tournaments are held six times a year in Japan, with each tournament lasting for 15 days. Prior to competing each day, the wrestlers partake in the ring entering ceremony wearing a 'kesho-mawashi' a silk apron with elaborately embroidered patterns costing anywhere between \$4000-\$5000 Australian. Rituals are performed firstly to attract the god's attention by clapping the hands together then holding the arms out with the palms up to show there are no concealed weapons. Leg lifts and a heavy stomp on the dohyo drives out any evil spirits. Sumo wrestlers then change into their fighting attire and await their turn. They are called into the ring, then again perform

certain rituals including leg stomps, clapping, rinsing out the mouth, wiping the body with a paper towel and throwing salt into the ring to purify it. Once the rituals have been performed, each rishiki takes his position behind the shikiri-sen and charges his opponent. Fights are usually brief. The loser is the first to touch the ground with any part of his body, apart from the feet, or the first to touch the ground outside the ring. Once the fight is complete the wrestlers return to their side, bow to each other then the referee points his gunbai (war fan) towards the winner. Each rishiki fights once per day (for those in the top two divisions). The tournament winner is the rishiki who wins the most bouts over the 15 days.

Life for a sumo wrestler is highly controlled and disciplined. The Sumo Association determines the behaviour of wrestlers, even going so far as banning wrestlers from driving, after one was seriously injured in a car accident. When youngsters enter sumo they must grow their hair long for the chonmage (topknot). They must wear a chonmage and traditional Japanese clothing whenever they are in public. Only wrestlers in the two highest divisions are salaried. These sekitori have either their own room or apartment if they are married. Junior wrestlers live in communal dormitories within their training stable. In the training stables, the juniors rise about 5am for their training sessions which are then followed by chores such as cooking and cleaning. The sekitori rise later and train after the juniors. The wrestlers don't eat breakfast but have a large lunch. A sumo meal - 'chankonabe' generally consists of a simmering stew of various types of fish, meat, vegies and rice all washed down with beer. This is followed by an afternoon nap, a routine to ensure weight gain. In the afternoon the junior wrestlers attend school classes or do chores. The sekitori are free to relax, reply to fan mail, etc. In the evenings they go out and socialise with their sponsors, whereas the juniors must stay at the training stable or attend a social event with the sekitori as his man-servant.

Due to their lifestyle, sumo wrestlers have a lower life expectancy of approximately 60-65 years. Post retirement, they tend to develop diabetes, have high blood pressure and suffer from heart attacks. Many through excessive alcohol intake develop liver problems. They also develop arthritis and joint related problems from the stress placed on their joints by their heavy frames. Making a career as a sumo wrestler is certainly challenging. There is fame and fortune there, but only if you work very hard and make countless sacrifices to succeed.

## Conservation park Taizhou style

In Latrobe City there are numerous bushland reserves that not only provide a haven for our unique flora and fauna, but also serve as passive recreation areas for our community to walk and enjoy natural surroundings. With Latrobe City's sister-city of Taizhou, in Jiangsu Province, located on the northern bank of the Yangtze River's lower reaches, it's only natural that a conservation park, Taizhou style, should be based around wetland.

Taizhou administers four county-level cities - Jingjiang, Taixing, Jiangyan and Xinghua. One of the municipality's favourite recreational locations - the Qinhu Lake Wetland Park - is located in the Jiangyan county-level city.

Approval for the park area was given in December 2003 by the Jiangsu Provincial Forestry Bureau. The 2600 hectare park lies in the river hinterland of the middle and lower reaches of central Jiangsu where the Yangtze and Huaihe rivers converge.

Currently, about 1200 hectares has been developed with the park encircling Xique Lake - which is also known as Magpie Lake. The lake, a central feature of the park, covers 210 hectares and local officials explain its water meets the national standard for grade-two drinking water.

Qinhu Lake Wetland Park is also located in one of three famous natural water basins in Jiangsu Province and consequently is noted for a concentration of biodiversity and migratory birds. Under national protection regulations, over 73 different species of wildlife - including red-crowned cranes, Chinese alligators and



A boardwalk in the Qinhu Lake Wetland Park

the world famous Milu deer - enjoy national level-one protection.

Jiangsu Province is a leader in the preservation of the Milu deer with several locations dedicated to building up the population of this species that faced extinction during the late 1800's.

Sometimes known as the 'David's deer' - so named after Pere David, a Basque missionary who first introduced the animal to Europe - preservation programs are based on over 200 farms around the world.

China is the homeland to these deer where now their population has expanded to approximately 2000 due to dedicated preservation programs, most of which are located in Jiangsu Province.

At the Qinhu Lake Wetland Park, one of these deer is handsomely displayed in a full size glass exhibition showcase similar to the Phar Lap exhibit at the Melbourne Museum, showing in clear

detail why the Milu deer is colloquially called 'none of the four'. The deer has quite a striking appearance - a camel's neck, a donkey's tail, cow-like hooves and a stag's horn.

A breeding program at the wetland park allows these deer to be on display, however their natural shyness means visitors need to view from afar and only the best long-range camera telephoto lens is able to 'capture the moment'.

The wetland park also offers a pleasant and relaxing environment in which to walk while witnessing various activities taking place on the main lake.

Like so many public domains in China, the Qinhu Lake Wetland Park allows family and friends to come together, relax and enjoy an opportunity to savour the outdoors. Gardens, resplendent with lakes, and some wildlife, particularly when the sun is shining, provide the perfect venue.

## Freezing in Hokkaido

**By Catherine Reid, assistant English teacher in Latrobe City's sister city of Takasago**

Every February, Sapporo, on the island of Hokkaido hosts Japan's largest 'yuki matsuri' (snow festival). Over 2 million people flock to "ohhhhh" and "ahhhhh" over thousands of ice/snow sculptures on display in Otari Park in central Sapporo and various locations in and around the city. Thousands of volunteers band together each year to design, build framework for and sculpt the works of art. Most of the massive sculptures are sponsored by some of Japan's leading companies taking advantage of the huge crowds and media frenzy expected each year. Representatives from a variety of countries around the world participate with locals in building the statues.

Not being from a particularly snowy region in the world, I was looking forward to spending a few days of sun and snow in the city. Much to my pleasure, it snowed the whole three days I was there.

Snow-covered parks and gardens with tree branches drooping heavily under the fresh snow enhanced my picturesque view of the city. Large snowflakes fell ever so slowly and settled impressively in large piles on roads, cars, even resting gently on beanies and hoods of those walking the streets. Rugged up with five layers of clothing, I felt very refreshed as snow drifted down around me whilst I wandered from sculpture to sculpture. The thousands of other tourists around me were barely noticeable with us all slipping and sliding together in unison on the dangerously ice covered paths.

The size and variety of the sculptures at this year's festival was staggering. It was hard to select a favourite. The reproduction of one of Japan's oldest castles, Hikone Castle, was definitely one of my favourites but so was the scene depicting an Antarctic landscape with Emperor penguins, two huskies, a whale and seals being visited by a massive ship. Other sculptures included an

amazing recreation of the Royal Grand Palace in Thailand's Chakri Maha Prasat Hall, Japanese and Disney animation characters, a gigantic ice maze as well as ice slides for the young and young-at-heart.

However, a trip to Hokkaido is not complete without sampling the massive array of fresh produce and locally made products. Hokkaido is the second largest island in Japan but is home to only five percent of the population (approximately six million people). The freshness and availability of seafood, beef and dairy products, vegetables and a noodle dish known as 'ramen' are many reasons that Japanese people visit Hokkaido. So, whilst in Hokkaido, I did as the Japanese do and ate my way through more than my fair share of ramen, ice cream and potatoes however I avoided the seafood since it's not really to my taste. Mongolian barbecue style restaurants are also very popular and it was in one of these that we cooked meat and vegetables on a small grill on our table. Surprise, surprise! The meat was Aussie lamb and very good too, I might add. Although, maybe it was the way I cooked and seasoned it!

I enjoyed my trip to the snow covered city. As a holiday destination it is a great place to visit, but to actually live there and have to dig my way out of my home every morning for four months of the year, cross country ski to work, wear countless layers of clothing outside only to cook on the air conditioned trains and in shopping centres, is definitely something I really don't care to experience. Give me Victoria's 'four seasons in one day' weather anytime. Well, within reason!



Catherine Reid in Hokkaido