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Preface

Professional Sumo (called “*Ozumō*”) is the most traditional and national martial art here in Japan. This traditional martial art has many representative components of Japanese culture. One of them is “shikona”. Shikona (四股名) is the ring name of each professional sumo wrestler (hereinafter “rikishi (力士)”) and is composed of Chinese characters (hereinafter “kanji(漢字)”). This book is to introduce you Japanese culture examining commonly-seen types of kanji used as part of shikona.

Sumo originated from Shinto and agricultural rituals for praying for richer crops in ancient times. As the time went by, sumo was gradually developed into a systematic professional martial art leaving its original and traditional form of Shinto rituals.

When you want to know the mentality of Japanese people, kanji in shikona is the key to understand that. If you learn the meaning of kanji in shikona and the background of its use, you will also learn the core of Japanese mentality which has been handed down from generation to generation since the ancient times. I also feel that traditional Japanese mentality has been showing a slight change in the long history of Professional Sumo, while many parts of Professional Sumo remain unchanged. I am not sure whether such a slight change comes from highly advanced capitalistic economy in this country or from the recent increase in the number of Non-Japanese rikishi. As the author, I would like you to enjoy this book to not only understand the Japanese mentality, but also feel such a slight change.

<http://www.sumomania.com>

Chapter 1

Kanji for Divinely Natural Products

Many types of kanji standing for divinely natural products such as mountain and river are very often used as part of shikona. One of the reasons is that sumo is originated from ancient Shinto rituals for praying for richer crops and local prosperity. Sumo event was held in front of a local Shrine in many parts of Japan, since this martial art was considered to purify the land and express a great respect to the nature and God.

Another reason is that many professional rikishi (hereinafter “rikishi”) come originally from rural areas in Japan. Each of them shall not forget his hometown and will try very hard to be a great rikishi who will surely become the pride of his hometown because his shikona is named after the divinely natural products representing the hometown.

“山”

Meaning : Mountain

How to Read : Yama • San • Zan

Among kanji for divinely natural products, “山” (mountain) is most commonly used as part of shikona. Mountain represents something big and mighty just like rikishi. Their home mountains have something precious from Shinto rituals for praying for richer crops in ancient times. From this viewpoint, mountain is a symbol of the blessings of hunted games and harvested pickings.

“川”

Meaning : River

How to Read : Kawa • Gawa

“川” (river) is another representative kanji standing for divinely natural products as well as mountain. Many farmers in Japan traditionally produce rice, and so rivers are their precious water supply source for rice fields. River means something grand and something close to our life. For example, many Japanese used to play in small rivers in the childhood.

“海”

Meaning : Sea

How to Read : Umi • Kai

Japan is a sea-surrounded country, and so it is logical for rikishi to have sea-related kanji as part of their shikona. Of all type of sea-related kanji, this kanji “海” is the representative one because it means the sea itself. The kanji gives us the feeling of something grand and wild. Many famous rikishi actually come from seacoast areas and went fishing in the sea to help their family business and then naturally strengthened their lower limbs in their boyhood.

“島”

Meaning: Island

How to Read : Shima

As you know, Japan is composed of many islands. This kanji is often used as part of shikona for rikishi who come originally from seacoast areas as well as “海” (sea). Rikishi using “山” (mountain) as part of their shikona often have a big physique and strong power, while those using “島” (island) are rather small in physique but excellent in wrestling techniques.