

Naha's Giant Tug-of-War



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.



We are pleased to announce that a travel coffee-table book, published by IEM, is now available for purchase at the Secretariat:

"A Globe-Trotting Engineer's Footprints"
by Ir. Chin Mee Poon

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Thank you.

Have you ever witnessed a tug-of-war with a rope 1.5m in diameter, 200m long and weighing 42 tonnes? It was definitely an experience for my wife and I on 11 October, 2015 in Naha, the prefectural capital of Okinawa in Western Japan. I had planned our visit to Okinawa to coincide with the annual 3-day Naha Festival on 10-12 October.

The tug-of-war was held on National Highway 58, a 6-lane road flanked by high-rise office blocks about 500m from the south-western end of the touristic section of Naha's main thorough fare Kokusai-dori (International Street).

On the first day, a parade was held on Kokusai-dori. On the second day, another parade, on a grander scale, was held at noon; it involved, among other participants, 14 flag-bearing teams representing different parts of Naha Municipality. The young men in each team, wearing a black uniform called mumunuchihanta, took turns to keep a heavy wooden flag pole upright on their hands. The pole was beautifully decorated at the top and attached to it was a rectangular flag bearing the name of the team. Considerable strength and skills were required to balance the flag pole; some of the team members armed with two-pronged sticks, were ready to prop the pole in case it toppled. The parade is known as Ufunnasunei.

The tug-of-war started shortly after the end of the parade, with the highway closed to traffic. In just a few minutes, the crowd had swelled to such numbers that the two sections of the rope, each 100m long and dubbed male rope and female rope respectively, were almost completely hidden by a sea of human heads. The ropes had been brought to the site and laid on the road medians before dawn. It was separated by the road junction in the middle.

The 14 flags in the parade were placed in position, with 7 on either side of the junction, splitting the crowd into two groups: East and West. After some speeches by officials and a martial arts demonstration, the two groups were mobilised to pull the male and female ropes to the centre of the junction where their looped ends met. With much effort, the vertical loop of the male rope was made to pass through the horizontal loop of the female rope and a

one-tonne wooden pin was inserted through it, locking the two ropes into one of 200m in length.

Then two shoguns, accompanied by two aides each, were carried on wooden platforms on the shoulders of young men and moved over and along the length rope until they were about 10m apart at the junction. They then waged a ceremonial battle to symbolise the rivalry between East and West, followed by a brief face-to-face spar between two martial art exponents standing on the rope loops.

The actual tug-of-war lasted only 30 minutes or so, and the East sidewon. It was more of a fun event than a serious competition. Anybody could join in and pull with all his/her might or simply rock forth and back with the rhythm of the wave of motion. Some 140 smaller ropes, each as thick as one's wrist and about 7m long, were attached to the giant rope for participants to grab and pull. So more than 5,000 people could take part in the pulling on either side, watched by more than 200,000 spectators! It was truly an amazing sight.



This tug-of-war could be traced back to 1712 but in the old days, it was only held on special occasions. In 1971, it was organised to mark the 50th anniversary of the formation of Naha Municipality and since then, it has been held annually. The event I witnessed was the 45th in the modern series of Naha's giant tug-of-war. In 1995, Guinness recognised the rope used in the Naha Giant Tug-of-War as the world's largest rope made of rice straw. Known locally as Naha Tsunahiki (那霸大綱挽), the tug-of-war itself is not recognised by Guinness as the largest in the world probably because it is not a serious competition and does not follow the strict rules of the sport. ■