

### Table tennis star Fukuhara warms Chinese hearts at Olympics

1) RIO DE JANEIRO – Ai Fukuhara will have the support of a nation when Japan takes on Singapore for the women’s table tennis team bronze medal at the Rio Olympics on Tuesday – plus a Chinese public that has taken the 27-year-old to its heart.

2) Japan faces Singapore having missed out on the chance to square off for the gold medal against No. 1-ranked China, where Fukuhara enjoys superstar status and a massive following on local social media.

3) Fukuhara, who is fluent in Mandarin and has 340,000 followers on her Weibo micro-blogging account, trained with the Chinese national team as a teenager and still has a Chinese coach.

4) The four-time Olympian’s doll-cute looks and friendly personality have won her legions of fans among Chinese men and women, and local reporters at the Rio Olympics expect them to show their support on Tuesday.

5) “If Japan gets the bronze medal and Fukuhara gets a bronze medal, I think it’s a good thing,” Beijing-based table tennis journalist Vera Wang told The Japan Times at Riocentro Pavilion 3, where the Rio Games table tennis competition is being held.

6) “People like her and want her to get the medal because maybe this is her last time at the Olympics. Of course people in China will be supporting her. “She’s so cute. She’s 27 years old but she’s like a child. Whenever I meet her, she always gives me chocolate and candy.”

7) Fukuhara has been busy keeping her social media followers updated during her time in Rio, posting that she had fixed a broken toilet in the Olympic Village and sending a message aiming love hearts at the China team lodgings.

8) “She’s very humorous,” said Fei Sun, a sports reporter from the Qingdao Daily. “She often appears on social media. She posts videos of her speaking Chinese because her Chinese is so good. She speaks Chinese as good as Chinese people. “She’s popular with young people, and maybe a lot of males like her because she’s very cute. She’s beautiful.”

9) Unfortunately for China’s single men, Fukuhara, who is known as “Fu Yuan Ai” in China, is already taken. Her boyfriend, Chiang Hung-chieh, is also in Rio playing for the Taiwanese national table tennis team.

10) “Chiang Hung-chieh is famous now because of Ai Fukuhara,” said Wang. “Ai is very popular. I think Fukuhara is one of the most popular Japanese in China, not just Japanese athletes.”

11) Fukuhara’s defeat to China’s Li Xiaoxia in the semifinals of the singles tournament sparked an outpouring of sympathy on Chinese social media, with the message “Don’t cry, Ai-chan” trending on Weibo.

12) Given the often-frosty relationship between Japan and China, many believe Fukuhara, who was chosen as Japan’s flag bearer for the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, is the ideal sporting ambassador.

13) “There is no problem between the people,” said Gregory Cheng, a 62-year-old physician from Hong Kong visiting Rio to watch the Olympics. “It is really between the governments and their politics that create the friction. I think as a whole, Chinese people are quite friendly toward Japanese people. People like Fukuhara obviously can help.”

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miss out on チャンスを逃す

square off 戦う身構えをする

massive 大量の、大規模な

following 従者、支持者

fluent 流暢な

legions of～多数の～

lodging 宿、宿泊

humorous ユーモアのある

spark 引き起こす

outpouring (感情の) ほとばしり

sympathy 同情

trend ある傾向を示す

flag bearer 旗手

ambassador 外交官

physician 内科医

friction 摩擦

#### ★Ice breaker for active discussion

1. What do you know about Ai Fukuhara? Why do you think she is so popular?

2. What do you think are the necessary qualities to be a team captain?

3. Ai Fukuhara has just married her Taiwanese boyfriend who is also a professional athlete. How do you think their marriage will affect their career?

4. What events in the Rio Olympics did you enjoy the most?

5. Make sentences using the following words: miss out on, massive, fluent, spark, sympathy, ambassador and friction.