

Pathways to Buraku Liberation: Competing Images of Freedom in Early Postwar Japan

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This paper explores Japanese Buraku liberation from 1946-1960. While previous scholarship mainly focuses on this period to explain later movement tensions, this paper seeks to explain why cooperation across the political spectrum was maintained in the early postwar period despite leftist dominance. This cooperation originated in ties formed between activists during wartime mobilization and was strengthened in the immediate postwar period by the shared desire to overcome the past and contribute to democratic development. Growing scepticism about the postwar order, the United States, and economic recovery, however, eventually exacerbated political tensions. Pronounced growth of the economy beginning in 1955 led some to openly advocate a non-revolutionary path to liberation through economic modernization. The first conservative Buraku organization was established amid increasing struggles on the political left to maintain a united front on the question of how to interpret the nature of Buraku liberation within a rapidly changing environment.

Keywords: Buraku liberation; cooperation; early postwar period; Japan; wartime mobilization

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I. Introduction

In the year leading up to the passing of the *Law for the Promotion of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Burakumin* in December 2016, many old academic debates resurfaced about the realities of Buraku discrimination in present day Japan, highlighting the serious differences liberation organizations and political parties still have in forging a shared understanding of the problem.¹ The “Buraku problem” refers to where mainstream Japanese society socially discriminates against people for complex reasons including ancestry, occupation, and place of residence,

¹ On December 7, 2016, Keiji Kokuta (1947-), Central Committee member of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and Chair of the JCP Diet Affairs Committee, held a press conference in Tokyo concerning the Bill for the Promotion of the Elimination of Buraku Discrimination. He argued that the bill would “cement” and “perpetuate” Buraku discrimination and called for its immediate withdrawal. Such strong resistance on the part of the JCP and JCP-affiliated activist groups to this law has its roots in earlier interpretative conflicts about the Buraku problem, particularly centering on understandings of the nature of discrimination and the desirability of state intervention and administrative guidance to help alleviate suffering. I am currently preparing an article for publication on the background to the passing of this law entitled “Contested Liberation: The JCP, Human Rights Groups, and the New Law.”

and it has been usefully compared to the Dalit (India) and Paekchong (Korea) problems.² While the overwhelming tendency in Japanese scholarship has been to focus on the complex histories behind the unraveling of a seemingly united postwar liberation movement, this paper attempts to approach the subject from the opposite direction.³ A focus on later tensions and movement splits can arguably be said to conceal one of the most striking features of early postwar Buraku liberation politics: the postwar maintenance of cross-party unity for a sustained period that was actually marked by acrimonious domestic political disputes and political splintering in relation to other issues.

Cooperation right across the political spectrum occurred in the early postwar Buraku liberation movement despite the clearly dominant position of Marxist historians and Japanese Communist Party (JCP) supporters within the National Committee for Buraku Liberation (*Buraku Kaihō Zenkoku I'inkai*, hereafter NCBL) founded in 1946, an organization which changed its name to the Buraku Liberation League (*Buraku Kaihō Dōmei*, hereafter BLL) in 1955. JCP-affiliated scholars and activists also dominated the research arm of the NCBL, the Research Institute for the Buraku Problem (*Buraku Mondai Kenkyūjo*, hereafter RICP), and their early publications reveal considerable combativeness towards “harmful opinions” thought on the political left to compromise the integrity of the liberation movement within a context of revolutionary struggle. Nonetheless, political conservatives, despite at times

² Timothy D. Amos, *Embodying Difference: The Making of Burakumin in Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 166; Joseph D. Hankins, *Working Skin: Making Leather, Making a Multicultural Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Ian Neary, “The Paekjong and the Hyongpyongsa: The Untouchables of Korea and Their Struggle for Liberation,” *Immigrants and Minorities* 6, no. 2 (1987): 117-150; Ian Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan: The Career of Matsumoto Jiichirō* (London: Routledge, 2010).

³ Sukeyuki Morooka, *Sengo Buraku Kaihō Ronsōshi* [History of Postwar Buraku Liberation Debates], vol. 1 (Tokyo: Tsuge Shobō, 1980); Fudesaka Hideyo, Miyazaki Manabu, and Ningen Shuppan Henshūbu, *Nihon Kyōsantō vs Buraku Kaihō Dōmei* [The Japanese Communist Party vs The Buraku Liberation League], (Tokyo: Ningen Shuppan, 2010).

considerable reservations that in some cases lead to the creation of breakaway factions and the establishment of different organizations, appeared willing to formally join the struggle for Buraku liberation with fellow NCBL members and maintain an ongoing affiliation, albeit while maintaining a clear preference for and vision of national integration over democratic socialist revolution. While the alliances forged between members of the NCBL/BLL with fundamentally different political views were unsteady and in some cases volatile, the multiparty arrangement within the NCBL/BLL lasted for close to fifteen years, until the breakaway formation of the conservative Japanese Assimilation Association (*Zen Nihon Dōwakai*) from the BLL in 1960.

The origins of this cooperation, the paper argues, can be located in the allegiances forged during Japan's period of wartime mobilization, often under state persecution. They were ties that were strengthened in the early postwar period by a mutual desire to forget the war and foster a common commitment to liberation as part of a broader process of Japanese democratic development. And they were ties that unraveled, albeit slowly, due to a shared general skepticism about the emerging postwar order, the role of the United States, and the likelihood and nature of economic recovery. Tensions on the political left, along with a series of rapid economic growth spurts from around 1955 brought incompatibilities and contradictions to the surface, suggesting to some the possibility of a non-revolutionary path to Buraku liberation through a process of economic modernization. It was within the context of the political left struggling within the NCBL to maintain a united front on the question of how to interpret the nature of Buraku liberation within this changing environment that the first conservative faction broke away.

II. Wartime Mobilization and its Immediate Legacy

The Zenkoku Suiheisha (National Leveler's Movement; hereafter Suiheisha) was an organization formed in 1922 by members of Buraku

communities throughout Japan who shared views about the need for direct action against the discrimination they faced in order to eradicate glaring, historically-generated inequalities. The Suiheisha itself was subject to considerable factionalism, a fact most clearly evident in the 1933 suggestion by one of the more radical leftwing factions within the movement to dissolve itself and merge into the peasant and proletarian labor movements.⁴ The Suiheisha also faced considerable competition from other state-backed and privately funded movements which promoted the idea of *yūwa* (harmony or conciliation) and the need to address the problems that rendered these people unable to successfully contribute to Japan's social, national, and imperial stability.⁵ Suiheisha policy to "liberate" (*kaihō*) Burakumin began to change by the mid-1930s, however, beginning to more proactively engage with the assimilationist activities and ideals of organizations such as the Chūō Yūwa Jigyō Kyōkai (Central Conciliation Projects Council).⁶

Mobilization of self-identifying Burakumin around nationalist causes should be understood at one level as a reluctant transition that took place within the context of real state oppression and political persecution.⁷ As noted by Asaji Takeshi, a serious crackdown on important organizational figures suspected of engaging in anti-fascist struggle in 1937 led to real concerns over the future of the Suiheisha movement. Within this context, while conservatives such as Izumino Rikizō began to urge for the removal of leftwing elements from the group in response to these clampdowns, Kitahara Taisaku, a key figure in the Suiheisha and postwar liberation movement, moved to resist such

⁴ Nobuaki Teraki and Midori Kurokawa, *Nyūmon Hisabetsu Buraku No Rekishi* [An Introduction to Buraku History] (Ōsaka-shi: Kaihō Shuppansha, 2016), 228-29.

⁵ Jeffrey Paul Bayliss, *On the Margins of Empire: Buraku and Korean Identity in Prewar and Wartime Japan* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

⁶ Nobuaki Teraki and Midori Kurokawa, *Nyūmon Hisabetsu Buraku No Rekishi*, 230.

⁷ Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan*, 101.

attempts, only to be urged to maintain silence by other group members.⁸ This incident came on the heels, however, of Kitahara's imprisonment in 1934-35, a period of incarceration that ended with considerable deterioration to his health and an issuance of a "rightwing conversion" (*tenkō*) statement.⁹ It should be noted that liberals were also increasingly targeted by the state at this time; some lost their jobs and others on occasion were arrested and jailed alongside communist sympathizers for speaking out against growing state oppression in relation to academic and other freedoms.¹⁰

Ideological compromise and capitulation were also clearly a part of the 1930s story of the unraveling of the Suiheisha, however. As Asaji has noted, Matsumoto Ji'ichirō maintained strong relationships with some of the early founders of the Suiheisha movement such as Saikō Mankichi despite their much earlier "rightwing conversions."¹¹ From 1937, moreover, Matsumoto himself began to publicly express support for the National Unity Government, and by 1939, he was increasingly participating in activities that involved *yūwa* leaders.¹² Meanwhile, branches of the Suiheisha began to build locally-based, non-partisan bodies preaching a national integration more in line with the National Spiritual Mobilization Movement. From around this time, Kitahara also left the Suiheisha to join the state socialist group "Greater Japan Young People's Party" (*Dai Nippon Seinentō*).¹³ Suiheisha and *yūwa* movement

⁸ Takeshi Asaji, *Ajia/Taiheiyō Sensō to Zenkoku Suiheisha* [The Asia Pacific War and the National Leveler's Movement] (Osaka: Kaiho Shuppansha, 2008), 89-90.

⁹ Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan*, 127-28.

¹⁰ Kazuteru Okiura, "Burakushi" *Ronsō Wo Yomitoku: Sengo Shisō No Nagare No Naka De* [Deciphering the Buraku History Wars: Within the Current of Postwar Thought] (Osaka: Kaihō Shuppansha, 2000), 38.

¹¹ Takeshi Asaji, *Ajia/Taiheiyō Sensō to Zenkoku Suiheisha*, 91-97, 101-03.

¹² Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan*, 105, 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 107; Takeshi Asaji, *Ajia/Taiheiyō Sensō to Zenkoku Suiheisha*, 91-97, 101-03. Asaji notes that this party began to suck life out of the Suiheisha movement in a way previously

participants also began to further strengthen ties with each other under these trying circumstances. Kitahara and Yamamoto Masao, a key figure in the national integration movement, for example, developed a relationship leading up to the war that involved at the very least Kitahara's tacit support for some of Yamamoto's ideas rooted in developing fixed year plans aimed at national integration.¹⁴ In 1939, Kitahara agreed with Yamamoto and one other former *yūwa* movement leader to establish the "Greater Harmony Organization" (*Daiwakai*).¹⁵ The following year, Kitahara along with Asada further proposed the formation of the "Buraku Welfare Citizens Movement" (*Buraku Kōsei Kōmin Undō*), which would bring an even wider range of people of differing political trajectories and convictions together.¹⁶

Prewar and wartime ties between activists of different political persuasions were forged in the crucible of state coercion and strategic political realignment on the part of the Suiheisha leaders as well as individual activists. An examination of the immediate prewar activities of Buraku liberation advocates and leaders reveals a process of both strong state opposition and persecution and the "rightwing conversion" of Suiheisha activists.¹⁷ During the war, a good number joined the government organization Dōwa Hōkōkai (Harmonization Public Service Society) after the Suiheisha's dissolution in 1942.¹⁸ And as Ian Neary notes, when focusing on the question of wartime activities of former Suiheisha members, particularly those at the leadership level like

unimaginable.

¹⁴ Yamamoto Masao, *Yamamoto Masao Chosakushū* [Collected Writings of Yamamoto Masao] (Osaka Jinken Hakubutsukan: Kaihō Shuppansha, 2008), 5.

¹⁵ Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan*, 108.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁷ Kazuteru Okiura, "Burakushi" *Ronsō Wo Yomitoku*, 42; Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan*, 107.

¹⁸ Nobuaki Teraki and Midori Kurokawa, *Nyūmon Hisabetsu Buraku No Rekishi*, 239.

Matsumoto who worked as politicians, it is difficult to know what to make of their actions particularly in light of the criticism that there appears to be little significant attempt at opposition.¹⁹

The National Committee for Buraku Liberation (NCBL), established in 1946 by Matsumoto, Kitahara, and Yamamoto (among others), three prewar Suiheisha and state *yūwa* program officials who respectively had affiliations with the Socialist, Communist, and Liberal parties, rode the surging wave of calls for postwar emancipation. After considerable debate about what their new organization should be called and who should be invited to participate, the decision was made to create an organization different in both name and focus from the prewar Suiheisha. The NCBL was thereafter established for the purpose of “the complete liberation of the Buraku masses,” welcoming all prewar Buraku organizational members regardless of political affiliation and offering full membership to Buraku and non-Buraku people alike.²⁰ A group of politicians from diverse political backgrounds attended the Buraku Liberation People’s Conference held in Kyoto the day following the NCBL’s inaugural meeting under the slogan “Liberation of oppressed people through the completion of democratic revolution.”²¹ Representatives from both the eastern and western branches of the Honganji temple who had also participated in prewar *yūwa* movements were likewise present. Speakers at the Buraku Liberation People’s Conference included key figures from the Kyoto Municipal Office, the Communist Party, the Liberal Party, the Progressive Party, and the Socialist Party. As Morooka Sukeyuki notes, the postwar point of departure for Buraku liberation was patently non-partisan, facilitated by the fact that representatives from both the earlier Suiheisha and the

¹⁹ Neary, *The Buraku Issue and Modern Japan*, 119-27.

²⁰ Sukeyuki Morooka, *Sengo Buraku Kaihō Ronsōshi*, vol. 1, 26.

²¹ Buraku Kaikō Kenkyūjo, ed., *Zenkoku Taikai Undō Hōshin* [National Committee Conference Campaign Policy], vol.1 (Osaka: Kaihō Shuppansha, 1980), 2-3.

government-sponsored *yūwa* movements were present.²²

This striking, non-partisan alignment was closely related to the way in which the desirability of Buraku liberation was able to serve as a rallying point of ideological agreement in an era witnessing the pendulum of state-sanctioned political ideals move from state militarism to liberal democracy (albeit under tight Occupational controls).²³ This reality is perhaps best captured in the 1946 speech by Yamamoto to the audience at the NCBL's inaugural meeting where he made multiple references to a "hungering" on the part of the Japanese people for democracy and situated "Buraku activism" (*Burakuminteki katsudō*) as a central means of achieving a united front against the oppressive policies of the Shidehara cabinet.²⁴ It is likely that such a belief was also more widely shared among NCBL founders. A history of the RIBP also records an "emancipatory feel" among those working in relation to this closely affiliated institution, with little or no distinction being made between "Buraku" and "non-Buraku" activists working together to address the Buraku problem.²⁵

Based on the founding statements of the NCBL it seems reasonable to conclude that Committee members were primarily intent on framing their postwar struggle as a tireless, persistent battle against state oppression, despite the troubled factual basis of such an interpretation.²⁶ Earlier support for Japan's war effort and a disinclination to address the recent past in any meaningful way, as well as a strong mutual desire to put serious distance between their own wartime activities and the future of the liberation movement, provided a firm basis for mutual collaboration in

²² Sukeyuki Morooka, *Sengo Buraku Kaihō Ronsōshi*, vol. 1, 25.

²³ Nobuaki Teraki and Midori Kurokawa, *Nyūmon Hisabetsu Buraku No Rekishi*, 243-44.

²⁴ Yamamoto Masao, *Yamamoto Masao Chosakushū*, 629, 31.

²⁵ Buraku Mondai Kenkyūjo, ed., *Buraku mondai kenkyūjo: 50 nen no ayumi* [Research Institute for the Buraku Problem: 50 years of history] (Kyoto: Buraku Mondai Kenkyūjo, 1998), 6-7.

²⁶ Sukeyuki Morooka, *Sengo Buraku Kaihō Ronsōshi*, vol. 1, 34-35.

the early postwar years. Also important was the continuing reality of Buraku discrimination in a Japan which was struggling to deal with its loss in the war and the accompanying devastation. The persistence of discrimination against members of Buraku communities and a shared desire to eradicate it provided even greater impetus for the immediate recommencement of the Buraku liberation movement, as well as an opportunity for the building of national cohesion across ideological and political lines in a society that increasingly appeared as irretrievably fractured.²⁷

III. Postwar Democracy and the Nascent Buraku Liberation Movement

The mantra of “liberation” (*kaihō*) in the early years of the postwar Buraku liberation movement was repeated by virtually all persons in the NCBL, although it held different meanings depending upon one’s political affiliation and evolving understanding of postwar conditions. The idea of liberation was successful in the early postwar years in binding radicals and conservatives with opposing ideas of how to conceive of and devise policy for the liberation movement. By appealing to the necessity of the transcendental act of overcoming feudal and prewar antidemocratic forces and the excesses of US-led Occupation (if not the actual reality of Occupation itself), it was possible to disguise the diversity which existed among activists and intellectuals involved in one capacity or another with the Buraku liberation movement about who exactly should become the target of liberation and what actually needed to be overcome. In his 1946 speech at the NCBL’s inaugural meeting, for example, while labelling himself a “liberal,” “anti-militarist,” and

²⁷ See, for example, Okiura’s vivid recounting of early postwar political activism, including the Osaka gathering on the day political prisoners were released from prison on October 10, 1945. Kazuteru Okiura, “*Burakushi*” *Ronsō Wo Yomitoku*, Chapter 2, especially 49-55.

“democrat,” Yamamoto fiercely defended Matsumoto in the face of calls for him to step down over his wartime activities. Yamamoto appealed to the audience to offer him their full support, describing Matsumoto as someone who threw his whole being into fighting for “the liberation of oppressed Burakumin.”²⁸

NCBL policies outlining what Buraku liberation entailed began to be drafted from 1947 and they initially contained several interesting strategies related to increased Buraku involvement in traditional industries like tanning, as well as advocacy of a range of welfare options to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of Buraku residents.²⁹ The following year the Committee issued two new reports clarifying the movement’s basis: “The Current Status of the Buraku Liberation Movement” and “The True Nature of the Buraku Problem.”³⁰ Very soon after issuing these documents, however, the Committee met with a panel of leading academics, including the well-known Marxist scholar Hani Gorō. The RIBP was established several months later.³¹

While the RIBP was initially a research institute for Buraku liberation where some interpretative diversity could exist among its members, the RIBP Charter clearly designated Burakumin a “remnant of the feudal system of social status,” situating the Institute very firmly within the interpretative framework of the prewar school mainstream *kōzaha* Marxism.³² Why this kind of wording or perspective did not work

²⁸ Yamamoto Masao, *Yamamoto Masao Chosakushū*, 632.

²⁹ Buraku Kaikō Kenkyūjo, *Zenkoku Taikai Undō Hōshin*, vol. 1, 6-10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

³¹ Buraku Mondai Kenkyūjo, *Buraku mondai kenkyūjo*, 101.

³² In the 1920s, a debate emerged between two Marxist factions in Japan—the *kōzaha* (lecture faction) and the *rōnōha* (farmer’s faction)—over the nature of Japanese capitalism. The former faction argued that Japanese capitalism was semi-feudal and required a subsequent revolution apart from the one at the time of Meiji, whereas the latter faction argued that a bourgeois revolution had in fact taken place at the time of Meiji. It was the *kōzaha* factional view of history that dominated much of post-war Japanese Marxian historiography. The contemporary Buraku minority were seen from this perspective as a feudal remnant, only able to be liberated from

to more fully alienate conservatives such as Yamamoto currently remains a question difficult to answer due to a paucity of available sources. Whatever the case, the RIBP was initially created in Asada's lounge room in 1948, and in its early years had an intimate relationship with the NCBL in terms of management, research, and book/journal publication and sales.³³

The main body of work published within the RIBP in the early postwar period consisted of studies that attempted to clarify the importance of the Buraku problem within the larger context of a struggle for Socialist Democracy. In other words, much of the early postwar research published by the RIBP was dedicated to defining and positioning Buraku liberation within a larger framework of proletarian struggle for democratic revolution. The first book published by the RIBP was Kitahara's 1950 work *Kutsujoku to Kaihō no Rekishi* (A History of Humiliation and Liberation), which both acknowledged a debt to the Marxist historian Inoue Kiyoshi in the preface and included a foreword by the Marxist historian Hani Gorō.³⁴ Kitahara's book discussed Burakumin as a group in society that should have disappeared, but remained the subject of discrimination because Japanese capitalism had preserved parts of feudal Japanese society such as the Emperor system and backward ways of thinking about human social relations, as well as created new problems for the Burakumin by breaking their monopoly on traditional Buraku industries. The path to freedom for the Burakumin, in Kitahara's view, lay in the scholarly clarification and removal of those backward feudal institutions which were restricting the Buraku from

discrimination through a future unification of the proletariat. Sukeyuki Morooka, *Sengo Buraku Kaihō Ronsōshi*, vol. 1, 128, 31.

³³ Asada Zennosuke, *Asada Zennosuke Zenkiroku: Sabetsu to Tatakaisuzukete* [The Complete Records of Asada Zennosuke: Continuing to Fight Discrimination], vol. 22 (Kyoto: Asada Kyōiku Zaidan, 1995), 59.

³⁴ Sukeyuki Morooka, *Sengo Buraku Kaihō Ronsōshi*, 1, 121.

becoming one with the rest of the Japanese proletariat.

Kitahara's 1950 volume sparked off an important debate dealt with in detail elsewhere.³⁵ In short, Takakuwa Suehide, a journalist and academic, challenged Kitahara on an issue of how best to interpret Buraku discrimination and Inoue Kiyoshi intervened in the debate, developing his famous "trinity" liberation theory in 1950, a theory that succeeded in both explaining the reasons for the historical emergence of the Buraku problem as well as linking it to the need for contemporary class struggle.³⁶ Inoue isolated the root causes of Buraku discrimination in what he termed "social status discrimination" (*mibun sabetsu*), which allegedly originated with the first sign of class difference in Japan in the ancient period. He further argued that it was only after the appearance of "social status distinctions" that "outcaste occupations" materialized, and that this discrimination had not disappeared because status distinctions prevented Burakumin from joining the proletariat on an equal footing to concentrate on class struggle.³⁷ Inoue also intimated that historical restrictions on residency and occupation had combined with the problem of status to create the Buraku problem and therefore their removal was the first concrete step towards Buraku liberation.

Inoue was subsequently appointed to the Central Committee of the NCBL in 1951 and was commissioned with the responsibility of drafting policy for the Buraku liberation movement, a position he held until 1963. In the same year that Inoue was appointed to this position, Asada Zennosuke led a group of activists in the NCBL on perhaps the most real "denunciation" (*kyūdan*) campaign of the postwar period—the "All

³⁵ Amos, *Embodying Difference*, 153-57.

³⁶ Asada Zennosuke *et al.*, "Sengo buraku kaihō undō no riron" [Postwar Buraku Liberation Movement Theory], *Buraku kaihō*, no. 100 (April 1977): 23-24.

³⁷ Inoue Kiyoshi, "Buraku kaihō riron to burakushi no kadai" [Buraku Liberation Theory and Issues in Buraku History], in *Sengo buraku mondai ronshū: kaihō riron I* [An Anthology of Writings on the Postwar Buraku Problem, vol. 1], ed. Buraku Mondai Kenkyūjo. (Kyoto: Buraku Mondai Kenkyūjo, 1998), 76-85; Amos, *Embodying Difference*, 153-57.

Romance Incident.”³⁸ Denunciation was a continuation of the prewar tactic of directly and very publicly protesting acts of discrimination until the people perceived to be responsible acknowledged their actions and made some gesture towards changing their behavior. In this case, the NCBL responded to a story published in the magazine *All Romance* called “Special Buraku,” written by a Kyoto public servant, where a Kyoto Buraku area was described as a place of poverty and crime. This led Asada to instigate a hard-hitting denunciation campaign against the author and publisher for this “discriminatory story,” an action immediately followed by a campaign against the Kyoto Municipal Government for their role in the “reproduction... of discriminatory ideas about the Buraku” through “administrative stagnation.”³⁹

It is clear from Asada’s comments at the time that Inoue’s theory of Buraku liberation centering on the removal of material differences in residence and occupation in Buraku areas had given him an important conceptual impetus for envisaging his own strategy of Buraku liberation. Drawing on Inoue’s theoretical offerings, Asada began to stress the importance of viewing Buraku discrimination through the realities of economic and social inequalities evidenced in poor living conditions. From this perspective, the only effective form of liberation came through political struggle by Burakumin themselves to achieve parity in Japanese society. Asada was clearly interested only in a theory of liberation that would support his actual struggles against local, prefectural, and national governments for concrete policies that would improve the living standards of people living in Buraku areas. Asada, moreover, building on Inoue’s theories, claimed that “the everyday economic demands of Burakumin themselves are a struggle against feudal social status

³⁸ Hankins, *Working Skin*, 137-39.

³⁹ Asada Zennosuke, *Sabetsu to tatakaisuzukete*, 167.

relations.”⁴⁰

Inoue’s production of a theory of Buraku liberation theory that was both able to explain in an intellectually sophisticated manner the root causes of the Buraku problem but which also supported concrete plans for Buraku liberation through demands for material improvement in Buraku communities provided a template for future NCBL activism. Inoue’s emphasis on a Buraku problem that was eventually going to be dissolved into class, however, also created a perplexing dilemma for the Buraku liberation movement. For those like Asada committed to the maintenance of a strong Buraku identity, “class” seemed to disguise the true realities of Buraku discrimination which were economic and political inequality targeting a minority. For those on the political right, moreover, the idea of class struggle appeared divisive, and essentially moved the focus away from Buraku liberation as a struggle against a false status designation that was unconstitutional to one which required strong class identification and a structural alteration of the postwar democratic system. These were tensions that would eventually drive deep wedges between the Communist and Socialist factions within the BLL on the one hand, and progressives and conservatives on the other.

IV. Conservative Pushback and Movement Splintering

The developments discussed in the previous section worked to alienate members of the NCBL who identified more with political liberal or conservative ideals and who began to balk at the kinds of argumentation and activism being promoted by Inoue and Asada. From their earliest days, both the NCBL and RIBP had clearly not awarded leadership positions with the Central Committee to conservative figures and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 167-68.

activists, a fact easily clarified through a survey of organizational composition and membership. The shift in focus during the Kitahara-Takakuwa-Inoue debate to class struggle likely proved a worrying development for some NCBL members and supporters, and signaled a considerable narrowing in scope in the early 1950s about how to conceptualize possible pathways to Buraku liberation. While these tensions did not necessarily reveal themselves in the records and minutes of the NCBL and RIBP, they certainly appeared at the regional chapter level, particularly in relation to organizational structures and debates over the handling of localized conflicts, although available sources offer only the most superficial albeit tantalizing of glimpses.

In Yamaguchi prefecture, for example, the local chapter of the NCBL was established in Ogori in 1949 with Yanai Masao, the uncle of Uniqlō's Yanai Tadashi, as its head. The local chapter engaged in some significant struggles against discrimination towards Buraku between 1950 and 1952, leading to at least two significant policy changes on the part of the prefectural government. Yanai's alleged apparent tendency to prefer to deal behind the scenes with government officials instead of through the local chapter, however, generated conflict between committee members. The local chapter split into two competing groups in 1953, one run out of Yanai's house and the other out of the Mantokuji Temple led by the key figures of Kanemoto Kenji and Yamamoto Rihei. Kanemoto and Yamamoto worked to have Yanai's membership of the NCBL revoked later in the same year and this was confirmed when Yanai decided to back a local Liberal Party candidate in an election. Yanai quickly established a new liberation organization called the Yamaguchi Prefecture Buraku Liberation Association (*Yamaguchi-ken Buraku Kaihō Rengōkai*). Yet the two organizations reconciled and merged in late 1954 with the help of a local prefectural bureaucrat under the new chapter name of Yamaguchi Prefecture Buraku Federation (*Yamaguchi-ken Buraku Renmei*). A new organizational system was also put in place to ensure that the leaders from both splinter groups would have equal

representation within the revamped chapter. Tensions soon resurfaced between the two former factions, however, even as the name of the organization was changed to the Yamaguchi Chapter of the Buraku Liberation League (*Buraku Kaihō Dōmei Yamaguchi-ken Rengōkai*) in 1955 to reflect the official change of the NCBL's name to the Buraku Liberation League (BLL). Yanai came to head the newly founded Japanese Assimilation Association in 1960.⁴¹

Turning to Wakayama Prefecture, the Liberal New Life League (*Jiyū Shinsei Dōmei*) was formed in 1946 with the participation of Tanaka Orinosuke, a member of the Japan Socialist Party. The organization saw itself as a “promotional force” for the construction of a new society and saw its role as elevating social consciousness in a way that discrimination would be considered by locals to be “unconstitutional.”⁴² This Buraku liberation organization attempted to build upon the prewar *yūwa* movement but disbanded in 1948 after experiencing a considerable period of inertia. The same year the local chapter of the NCBL was formed with Tanaka as its head.⁴³ Various incidents of discrimination in 1949 and 1950 led to changes in local government policies particularly in the area of education, although differences in policy and approach can be observed between the northern and southern parts of the prefecture. A further large-scale incident in 1952, following directly on the heels of the

⁴¹ Buraku Kaihō Dōmei Yamaguchi-ken Rengōkai, *Yamaguchi-ken no Buraku Mondai ni tsuite* [About the Buraku Problem in Yamaguchi Prefecture]. Available at <http://y-kaihou.jp/burakumondai.html>. Accessed September 27, 2017; Matsuura Kenji, “Yamaguchi-ken” [Yamaguchi Prefecture]. Available at <http://www.blhrii.org/old/jiten/index.php?%A1%F6%BB%B3%B8%FD%B8%A9>.

⁴² Wakayama no Burakushi Hensankai, ed., *Wakayama No Burakushi: Shiryōhen Kingendai I* [Wakayama Buraku History: Modern/Contemporary Sources] (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2010), 580 (document 7).

⁴³ Shigekatsu Nishi, “Sengo Dōwa Kyōiku Undoshi No Tame No Jyakkan No Kōsatsu [A Few Notes Pertaining to Postwar Buraku Education Movement History],” *Kyōikugaku Kenkyū* 38, no. 3 (1971); Ikeda Seirō, “Wakayama.” Available at <http://www.blhrii.org/old/jiten/index.php?%A1%F6%CF%C2%B2%CE%BB%B3%B8%A9>.

aforementioned “All Romance Incident,” led to a successful push to have a local assemblyman ousted from office for discriminating against another local Buraku lawmaker.⁴⁴

The Shingu Buraku community later made famous by Nakagami Kenji’s novels apparently did not establish a chapter of the NCBL until 1955, the year that the organization changed its name to the Buraku Liberation League.⁴⁵ Just a few months later, the NCBL came under heavy criticism from a new organization called the Democratic Brotherhood (*Minshū Dōshikai*). This organization advocated for the “protection of Buraku peace and mutual human rights based on the respect of religion and morality” emphasizing the principle of *yūwa*.⁴⁶ In light of the later struggles in the realm of education that Wakayama prefecture was to experience in the period 1957-59 through the introduction of the Teacher’s Efficiency Rating System (*Kinmu Hyōtei*), and the central role of the BLL in much of that activism, it is likely that conservative advocates of Buraku liberation were becoming increasingly concerned about the growing dominance of the idea of “class struggle” within localized processes of democratic agitation and the perceived destructiveness of such a view to regional and national unity. Yamamoto Masao, at the bequest of the Liberal Democratic Party, was sent to Wakayama in 1959, an action that he acknowledged later in life to be for the purpose of “inspection.”⁴⁷

From the above it is clear that the splintering away of conservative factions from the NCBL in the mid-1950s was witnessed at the local

⁴⁴ Ikeda Seirō, “Wakayama No Buraku Kaihō Undō: Suiheisha Sōritsu Kara 80 Nen” [Wakayama’s Buraku Liberation Movement: Eighty Years After the Suiheisha’s Establishment]. Available at http://www.blhri.org/old/info/koza/koza_0124.htm.

⁴⁵ Wakayama no Burakushi Hensankai, *Wakayama No Burakushi*, 591 (document 32).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 591 (document 33).

⁴⁷ Shigekatsu Nishi, “Sengo Dōwa Kyōiku Undoshi No Tame No Jyakkan No Kōsatsu,” 169-70; Sukeyuki Morooka, *Sengo Buraku Kaihō Ronsōshi* [History of Postwar Buraku Liberation Debates], vol. 3 (Tokyo: Tsuge Shobō, 1982), 292.

level both in Yamaguchi and Wakayama. While still much needs to be done to flesh out the various activities of the NCBL at both the national and local levels, this preliminary focus on chapters within two key prefectures with large Buraku populations is nonetheless both instructive and perhaps even symptomatic of broader trends. Despite the clear tensions in both regions over issues of how to address discrimination, activism against it, and education designed to eliminate it at the local level, liberals and conservatives affiliated with the NCBL such as Yanai and Yamamoto continued to maintain connections to the organization, which came to be virtually non-existent in any meaningful sense from around the middle of the 1950s. Yet despite this conflict at the local chapter level in some regions, the NCBL remained the only Buraku liberation organization until 1960 and open hostility of members and affiliates towards each other remained scarce. Indeed it appears to have been only in 1960, for example, that Kitahara first openly targeted Yamamoto for sustained public criticism. Even then, Kitahara continued to work closely with Yamamoto during the 1960s as both were members of the government-appointed working committee on the Buraku problem that eventually led to the passing of the Special Measures Law in 1969.

V. Conclusion

The early years of wrestling with the nature of Buraku discrimination in the new conditions of the postwar period likely deferred some on the underlying tensions felt by liberation activists on the political right, who were themselves wrestling with the implications of Japan's new constitution and what that meant for the discriminated individual within a modern liberal democracy. That Japan needed democratic revolution was clear to all at the time of the establishment of the NCBL, but whether that meant a change in political system or simply an enforcement of postwar principles enshrined in the new Japanese constitution was for the longest time treated as an intramural issue, at least in relation to the

Buraku issue. More research, however, particularly at the local level in relation to the day-to-day operations of the NCBL, will be required to reveal some of the deeper tensions and contradictions that were simmering beneath the surface.

Given the nationalist impulse present in both the political left and right in the 1950s, the Buraku problem can perhaps be said to have served as the ideal focal point for cross-party agreement. That the Buraku problem was a potential source of national embarrassment that needed to be overcome as Japan mobilized itself again for national peace was something that could basically be agreed upon by people from all different political persuasions. Wartime mobilization had enabled formidable ties to be forged across movements with very different ideological agendas and visions of how to achieve freedom from discrimination for Burakumin and these experiences and bonds enabled the NCBL to maintain a unified front at the national level well into the 1950s. Yet with Japan's "economic miracle" arriving as important evidence of the possible viability of modernization theory in the late 1950s, conservatives within the BLL such as Yamamoto took heart that their vision for Buraku liberation rooted in integrating former outcaste communities into the national body through strategic investment of public funds and encouragement of private industry was a viable alternative to faltering visions of democratic revolution on the political left.

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