Burakumin: Embracing the Subaltern

By Madeleine Spangler
Burakumin have faced evolving discrimination for the past four centuries because of their socio-economic status, location of their communities, and their ancestry. Throughout the history of this group, burakumin have found ways to fight for their rights and try to end discrimination.

In recent years, a new trend of burakumin embracing their subaltern identity has arisen that defies the majority population and challenges the myth of Japanese homogeneity. This trend is popular with young, famous burakumin who are embracing their identity rather than hiding it, as has been common in the past.

This presentation will analyze this trend in the historical context of discrimination and how it differs from past activism. Future implications and research questions will also be discussed.
Outline

 Definition of Key Terms
 Edo Period (1603 – 1867) – Basis for discrimination
 Maps
 Postwar Period (1940s to 1960s) – Burakumin fight back
 Kenji Nakagami (late 1970s – 1980s) – Linchpin for reclaiming identity
 Modern times (21st century – present) – Changing group dynamics; Embracing the subaltern
 Future Research Questions
Key Terms

- **Burakumin (部落民)** – “village people,” a minority group in Japanese society
  - Generally not a term to use in Japan

- **Subaltern Identity**
  - “of inferior rank”
  - Associated with a variety of minority groups (ethnic, socio-economic, religious, and other minority groups)
  - Ex. Zainichi Koreans, Burakumin
Background & origins

- “burakumin” are the modern ancestors of the Edo Period (1603 – 1867) untouchables.
- Discrimination was initially socioeconomic, as those people were segregated from society due to their occupations as butchers, undertakers, tanners, etc.
- Religious and practical concerns
- Burakumin are racially identical to the mainstream Japanese population
- Burakumin lived in ghettoized, physically separate communities and were not allowed to socialize with non-burakumin.
- Burakumin still face some of this same discrimination
19th century maps of segregated burakumin communities (2009 Google controversy)
Fighting for equality

In post-war Japan, the Burakumin Liberation League was formed in order to fight discrimination.

Some politicians “come out” as burakumin.

Closing of the Jinshin Koseki Records by the Ministry of Justice in January 1969

- Made it more difficult for employers, potential in-laws, and educational facilities to discriminate
- But secret rosters still circulated... And may still be in circulation today.

Burakumin studies begin in earnest
Kenji Nakagami was a well-known Japanese author who received the prestigious Akutagawa prize for his work “The Cape” in 1975.

“The Cape” is a story about a burakumin family, although this was not known until Nakagami revealed his burakumin ancestry in 1978.

Many of Nakagami’s works are set in buraku communities, and they challenge the image of homogenous Japan while detailing discrimination that buraku communities face.
From Past to Present

Nakagami’s popularity not only helped non-burakumin understand the problems that people of buraku heritage have to deal with, but he also opened the door for future burakumin to embrace their own identity.

While some burakumin had been open about their identity before, these groups mainly included politicians and authors.

Nowadays, a new trend is picking up along the lines of popular culture in Japan.
Subaltern Identity

Subaltern = “of inferior rank”

Embracing this identity rather than rejecting or hiding it
- Challenges myth of Japanese homogeneity
- Outsider vs. insider
- Speaking out against prejudices
- Pride in one’s own identity

Other groups:
- Korean
- Chinese
Modern trends

- Glamorous and unique identity vs. hidden, taboo topic
- Questions of motivation
- Publicity stunts? Rebellious youth?

- Pop stars, actors/actresses, models, etc.
- Change from the mainly politicians and authors of the previous half-century.

- Example: *Morning Musume’s* Ai Kago
The Future Fate of the Burakumin

- Blurring the lines of communities
  - Low-rent areas attract non-buraku individuals
  - Government subsidies to improve communities
  - Education more accessible for young burakumin

- Official discrimination banned
  - Records closed

- Unofficial lists of celebrity burakumin
  - Pop culture icons “coming out” may help build these records and increase discrimination
  - On the flip side, encourages open discussion (especially w/ youth)
  - Will this trend help to further normalize the identity?

- Mob ties
Future Research Questions

- Embracing their subaltern identity: what effect will this have on discrimination in the future?
- Turning the public eye to the burakumin
  - How is this viewed internally (within burakumin communities)?
- Is this blurring lines or building lines?
  - Government vs. authors and popular artists
- Normalization vs. glamorization of the identity
- Will this be a long-term trend or just a passing fad?