Matsumoto Jiichirō (1887–1966) is now most often remembered as the undisputed leader of the post-war Buraku liberation movement from the time of its reformation in 1946 until his death in 1966. However, during the 1950s he was well known within Japan as the leader of the most left wing of the various factions that divided the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and a widely travelled campaigner who worked both within the international peace movement and advocated improved relations with China. Despite his national and even international reputation he retained strong links with his native Fukuoka and indeed that local identity was an important factor that supported and conditioned his political activity. In this chapter I will explore the various ways in which this manifested itself.

Early Life

Matsumoto’s place of birth was Kanehira, one of three small outcaste communities to the east of Fukuoka City and, in 1887, just outside the city boundary. This had a profound impact on his life. While he came across very little discrimination at the first primary school he attended, when he started at upper primary school in Sumiyoshi he was regularly teased and insulted by older boys calling him an eta. He was big for his age and would sometimes fight back, but only at the risk of punishment from the teachers who shared the prejudices of the surrounding community. He would spend the rest of his life fighting against discrimination in one form or another.

Leather-making had been an important industry in outcaste communities but it employed only a minority of households. Most made a living from farming and in the old province of Chikuzen they were controlled

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1 *eta*—translated as ‘defilement abundant’—was one of the names given to the pre-modern outcaste communities. It continued to be used during the twentieth century, and indeed up until the present day, as a term of insult much like the ‘n-word’ in the USA.
by the local administrative structure, and paid local taxes. The Emancipation Edict of 1871, while not eliminating prejudice anywhere in Japan, as Howells puts it, did succeed in, ‘Abolishing the status system [and] deprived the outcastes of their despised but necessary place in society, leaving them instead despised and extraneous.’2 From this time on Buraku families had to find ways of making a living often unconnected with the roles to which they had been ascribed in Tokugawa Japan. Matsumoto’s family farmed a small area of land but this was insufficient to support a family of two adults and five children, so they supplemented it by making thongs for traditional Japanese footwear—setta and geta. As the century progressed they specialized in growing vegetables that they would take on a handcart to sell in the markets of Hakata and Fukuoka. Elsewhere in Fukuoka Prefecture the marginalized Buraku community were finding work for themselves operating rickshaws or working in the less well-capitalized mines that, on the one hand provided them with an income, but at the same time confirmed their marginalized position within the emergent capitalist economy.

There is no doubt that prejudice remained strong and gave continued support to the discrimination against Burakumin within everyday life. However, escape was not impossible. After graduating from Sumiyoshi Upper Primary School, Jiichirō went first to Kyoto, then to Tokyo to further his education. This period of his life is not well documented but it seems that he went to several different schools over a period of three to four years, and only returned to Fukuoka a few months before his twentieth birthday. This suggests two things: firstly that his family, though far from wealthy, had enough income not to be dependent on Jiichirō to keep the family going, and may even have had sufficient surplus to support him while he was away from home; secondly that, perhaps like most young men, he was not particularly attached to his place of birth. He had to return to Fukuoka to take the medical examination prior to conscription, but he was rejected by the military and within days he left not just Fukuoka but also Japan in search of adventures abroad.

Matsumoto’s status origins would be a—probably the—defining feature in his life but one can make the case that there was an element of choice. As his later career would demonstrate, he was a man of great charm and ability. He could probably have succeeded in whatever he turned his hand

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