

ODE TO THE STRENGTHENING POWER OF A CUP OF GOOD COFFEE

Hosaka writes that Japan is getting older and poorer, including the 3 million people who still live in the country's 840 *burakus* ("outcaste settlements"). Many inner-city *burakus* that were upgraded and revitalized in 70s and 80s are, for various reasons, becoming dilapidated and deserted. In 2002, national government subsidies that were fought very hard for by the Buraku Liberation movement, to make up for centuries of discrimination, were stopped. And in 2007, changes in the rent control laws have driven up public housing rents and driven out young people, with the result that many *burakus* (including Asaka) have become half-empty settlements of mostly elderly, mostly poor and mostly living alone. At the same time, Osaka's mayor has made matters worse by pursuing a policy of taking back and selling off to private commercial interests the public land, housing and amenities (like schools, community centers, playgrounds and public bathhouses) in *burakus*, seriously eroding the quality of life and community management. So the residents in these *burakus*, which are slowly turning back into slums, are realizing they can no longer depend on government assistance and need to develop their own systems of mutual support within their communities.

Faced with this impoverishing of their communities, several *burakus* in Osaka (including Asaka, Yata and Kashima) have jointly formed a research group and undertaken self-surveys and analysis, with help from friends in ACHR-Japan, and Osaka City University, and decided to establish a "people-based town development agency" to help the residents in these *burakus* to regain their self-management capacities and revive their once-strong communities through a variety of activities. So far, they've raised funds (\$100,000 raised locally to match a \$20,000 grant from ACCA) and organized a series of planning workshops and exchanges with friends in Korea.



Enter Cafe Cosmos: But perhaps the most immediately transforming project the new town development agency has undertaken is the opening of a little cafe in Asaka. The community negotiated with the city to use one of the vacant rental housing units, and in August 2013, they converted this little apartment into a cafe, where the community's young and old people can gather, enjoy coffee and traditional Japanese food, organize house maintenance consultations and generally mingle. They called their new community gathering place Cafe Cosmos. Because so many of the community facilities and gathering places in these *burakus* have been closed down by the city (like public baths, small shops, community centers), the lack of venues for people to gather meant that people were no longer gathering and were becoming increasingly isolated. So it's no surprise that the Cafe Cosmos has been a hit, and is almost constantly packed, with 20 - 30 customers at a time, filling all the tables. The cafe is open every day

from ten to five o'clock, and is run by two community women volunteers, Akiko and Etsuko, who prepare and sell inexpensive plates of *okonomiyaki* (Japanese pancakes), and *ramen* noodles and vegetables, as well as a popular breakfast set (toast, coffee and a boiled egg, for 250 yen). Four months after the cafe opened, the smiling Akiko said, "Older people here used to isolate themselves, but gradually, they are becoming regular customers here at the cafe."

Hosaka writes that Yamamoto-san and other *buraku* leaders in Osaka plan to occupy other vacant units, expand the functions of Cafe Cosmos and add a "life-support consultation" center, where elderly community members who live alone can be assisted and linked to various social welfare programs and support services. There are also discussions about starting community-oriented businesses and other community-managed welfare programs, as part of their program to revitalize their *burakus*. By showing a new model of community management in these three *burakus*, Yamamoto-san hopes the project will expand to involve a large number of other low-income settlements in Osaka facing similar problems and coping with these same adverse policy trends. For more information, please contact Hosaka at: hosaka.m@k6.dion.ne.jp

(The photos of Cafe Cosmos are courtesy of the Buraku Liberation League News)