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Demarcation and Recollection of Collectivity in a Chuvash Village, Russia

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Demarcation and Recollection of Collectivity in a Chuvash Village, Russia¹⁾

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チュヴァシ村落の農業集団化にともなう分節化と想起

後藤正憲

The author of this paper points out that, in recent ethnographies of former-socialist countries, peoples' memories of socialist experiences tend to be taken as a compensation for, or an alternative to, the repression suffered by people in socialist times. Such a view of memory in general is based on the premise that human memories are like a projection of an image on the screen of the mind. This projection model of memory can be clearly demonstrated by comparing the controversy over agricultural forms in Russia, and the discussion of memory extended by Paul de Man. In discussing human memory, the author takes as an example the history of farming collectivization among the Chuvash in Russia, and examines how it is recollected by a person who experienced the collectivization personally. In conclusion, it will be suggested that the recollection of such a socialist experience as collectivization should not be taken as a projection, but rather as something like an illumination, which consists of dialectic relations between official discourses such as the demarcation of social categories and the personal recollections of experiences.

ポスト冷戦期の今日では、旧社会主義国でかつての経験がどのように記憶されているかを扱った民族誌的研究が、多く生み出されている。その中では多くの場合、今日における人々の記憶が、当時の社会的抑圧の代償またはオルタナティブとして扱われている。しかしこうした見方は、人の記憶を過去から未来へ向けて直線的に投影されるイメージとして想定するものであり、実際の記憶の現れ方にそぐうものではない。本論では、まずロシアのチュヴァシにおけ

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る農業形態に関する論争を取り上げ、次にポール・ド・マンによる人の記憶に関する議論について考察する。両者に共通して見られる問題点を指摘した上で、今日チュヴァシでかつての農業集団化の記憶がどのように想起されるかについての具体例を取り上げる。それによって、人の記憶がかつて国家によって引かれた社会的境界に沿いながらも、その場に生まれる関係性に応じて様々に変化しながら現れる様子を明らかにする。

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Introduction

Since the Cold War era has ended, a series of anthropological works on people's memories of the socialist experiences in Russia and former socialist countries have been made. Many of the discussions suppose that the memories of the socialist experiences for the people stand today in compensation for the lost part of their personal lives. Some argue that people use their own memories for political purposes in order to reorganize the relationships with their surroundings in the present day (Berdahl 1999; Empson 2007). Others illustrate how hard experiences are recalled by people in an allegorical way, and are thus displaced to external stories (Humphrey 2003; Pedersen 2006). The arguments in either case are based on a premise that a personal memory of something should be called upon to make up for the loss imposed by the official discourses of domination, that is, oblivious to what actually happened.

However, human memory does not always work in compensation for, or as an alternative to, suppressive experiences in the past. The official discourses of domination, which are supposed to conceal facts in actual lives, can rather become an essential and constitutive part of the memories of the people. Although the discussions about people's memories from a compensatory point of view pay the most attention to the memories themselves, little attention has been given to the significance of the socialist experiences for the people. The socialist past has often been treated as a cause of loss for personal agency, so that it should be compensated for by, and filled in with, personal memories (ex. Skultans 1998). However, the significance of the past can be found in how its experiences affect people's awareness

in their memories today. The goal of this paper is to investigate the mechanism of memory as a dialectical composition of personal recollection of the dominated, and the official discourses of domination.

In this discussion, particular attention should be given to the boundaries between the social categories. Most of the social categories, which were demarcated in the Soviet socialist era, such as collective farmers and individual farmers, have lost their actual significance today. However, no matter how artificial the boundaries of the social categories are, they are still today points indicative of the difference between oneself and others. The awareness of the difference, for the people who are on the border between social categories, manifests itself in different ways each time, depending on their relationship with others with whom they deal with. To follow the manifestation of this awareness of difference will give us an idea of how the official discourses concerning social categories, experienced in the Soviet socialist era, compose the memories people conjure up at every moment of everyday life. Taking these interests into mind, I will develop my discussion referring to examples from the Chuvash, the Turkic people living in the Middle Volga region in Russia.

1 Controversy over Agricultural Forms

The Chuvash is one of the republics that make up the Russian Federation. The chief industry is agriculture. Mainly grain, potato and dairy products are produced. Today, there is a controversy over what is the most appropriate type of farming, namely, a controversy between the proponents of collective farming and the independent farming of individual households. The controversy is a serious one all the more because there are no mineral resources, nor particular manufacturing industry in the republic.

Let us review the agricultural situation of the past and the background of the controversy first. Agriculture in Soviet Russia had mainly revolved around collective farms. Toward the end of the Soviet era, however, the collective way of farming could not help but be reconsidered, because most farms found it difficult to subsist. After the Soviet Union collapsed, these farms were virtually devastated.

There were various reasons why collective farms proved ineffective. The biggest one was that governmental support had been lost. The prices of farm produce had been prevented from rising in comparison with other products during the Soviet era. The consequent lack of balance had been compensated for by subsidies. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the federal budgetary cutback for agriculture naturally brought a financial deadlock to collective farms. After the federal law about farm engagement was enacted in December 1990, every farmer could choose the type of farming he/she wanted to pursue. Subsequently, a large portion of the collective farms was virtually dissolved (Il'in 2005: 83).

Then, every farmer who had worked on collectives was provided with a certain

number of plots of land as a share. Now, the situation is as bleak as before, or even worse due to exorbitant fuel prices. Although the plots of land have been consolidated by farming organizations, hardly anyone wants to work for these organizations for the miserable pay offered. Nor is it preferable to be self-employed, which is rife with risks. A lot of the people sell their plots and work away from home in neighboring cities or on intensive farms in neighboring Russia.

It is under these circumstances that a controversy occurs between both proponents and opponents of collective farming. Those who champion collective farming claim that it conforms to the mentality (*mentalitet*) of the Russian and the Chuvash people. According to them, various customary practices and traditional values of the Russian farmers, such as common ownership of land and funds, cooperative spirit, egalitarianism and mutual aid, have been cultivated in harsh natural conditions for subsistence, and have been handed down from generation to generation. Therefore, the collectivization of farming under Stalin's regime was legitimate, because it followed "the social memory and historical experience" of the people (Il'in 2005: 35). Conversely, the recent farm reformation depending on individual enterprise went against the collective "mentality" of farmers, so it is understandable that agriculture has declined.

However, those who defend individual farming argue that collectivization discouraged self-reliance, and that the collective farmers became less inclined to work cooperatively. The point of this argument is that a traditional culture as essential as community order was kept at every independent farm household. But, in the Soviet era, as layers of party organization gained greater control of people's lives, the memory of old traditions was gradually lost (Leont'ev 2005). Thus, the defenders of the independent farming of each individual household, as well as the defenders of collectives, associate the farming style they defend with their sphere of collective memory. Moreover, they conceive that the fundamental reason for the present difficulties is due to a loss of the memories essential for that part of their lifestyle, which should have been retained to sustain people's livelihood.

2 Mnemonic Aporia of de Man

There seems to be no clue as to a solution to the controversy over the farming styles. Each party claims the legitimacy of the memories associated with its own desirable style of farming, which is entirely incompatible with the other party's style. In order to deepen our view of this impasse, let us refer to Paul de Man's discussion on memory. He not only provides a deep analysis of memory, but his argument itself shows the limitations of any discussion on the basis of a dichotomous point of view.

In his attempt to discuss the relationship between experiencing literature and literary theory, de Man followed Hegel's discussion about experiences of beauty

and aesthetics. He took notice specifically of Hegel's method of distinction between two types of memory, corresponding to the empirical and the metaphysical. One of them is what Hegel called *Erinnerung* (recollection), as it is formed by the following procedure: first incidents or experiences in everyday life are internalized by people, then the memory of that appears outward in dialectic way. On the other hand, the effect of such a mechanical effort as memorizing by writing names, was called *Gedächtnis* (memorization), which is quite distinct from the empirical process of *recollection*.

The distinction that Hegel made between *Erinnerung* and *Gedächtnis* corresponds to his distinction between the notion of the *symbolic* and the *semiotic*. On one hand, while a form and meaning merge inseparably into a manifestation of a concrete shape in the *symbolic*, on the other hand, sign and its meaning are tied arbitrarily to the *semiotic*. In other words, *recollection* is related to an immediate manifestation of a certain symbol, while *memorization* is related to writing down names as arbitrary signs. Further, referring to Hegel, de Man pointed out that *recollection* is based on sensory perception, while *memorization* is based on intellectual thinking.

Pointing out several interconnecting dichotomies like these, de Man came to the point of his argument: the relationship between a dichotomous couple, such as a sign and a symbol, thinking and perceiving, *memorization* and *recollection*, is "mutual obliteration" (de Man 1982: 770). That means, de Man did not focus so much the semiotic theory of Hegel's discussion as epistemological aporia of it. What makes de Man's discussion characteristic is that he deemed the relationship between a contrastive pair as entirely incompatible.

According to his discussion, generality-oriented thought, and each experience attributed to individuality, are irreducibly contradictory to each other. Once a singular experience of *I* is turned into a thought, the singularity is lost. This is because things only become objects of thought when they take on generality. The contradiction between singularity and generality leads to the paradoxical notion of de Man's:

The very enterprise of thought seems to be paralyzed from the start. It can only get under way if the knowledge that renders it impossible, the knowledge that the linguistic position of the I is only possible if the I forgets what it is (namely, *I*), if this knowledge is itself forgotten (de Man 1982: 769) [Italics mine].

In the same way, *memorization* would take on the generality of *memory*, only when the singularity and individuality of remembrance (namely, *recollection*) is erased. On these grounds, de Man proposed the next question: "But how are we to recognize what will necessarily be erased and forgotten, since *I* is, per definition, what I can never say?" (de Man 1982: 770) [Italics mine]. His question throws light on the aporia of subjectivity that is immanent in memory. That means, while it is inevitable for each memory to turn to the more generalized memorization to be

the object of thought, which makes it impossible at the same time to return to the individual experience of recollection. But, how should we take de Man's perplexing question? Do we have to give up our own memory following de Man's suggestion?

3 Schematic Sameness of Dichotomy

Let us return to the controversy over the agricultural forms, and compare the controversy with de Man's contention. In the controversy over the farming styles, while some scholars claimed that collective elements were memorized in the "mentality" of farmers, others claimed that the essential memory should be found in the "tradition", which has been kept by self-reliant individual farm households.

Even though these two arguments appear contradictory, they are in practice based on a common argument, because both of them reduce the collective memory to an attribute of some accomplished social category, either a collective farm organization or an individual farm household. Both proponents presuppose an established category classification, and an established quality of collective memory. Besides, they perceive memory like an image projected on the human mind by a light coming straight from prehistory toward the future. In those cases, a foreign thing is nothing more than an obstacle, which blocks the projection. Once farms are collectivized, any memory associated with individual farm households is blocked off, and conversely, once the self-supporting accounting system is introduced, any memory of collectivity in farming can be obstructed.

Although both contexts and texts are quite different from each other, if we limit our attention to the scheme of the dichotomy, the controversy over the farming styles presents the same structure with de Man's discussion. The difficulty he found in the discussion about memory was caused by his presupposing the establishment of self, and reducing the distinction between *I* and self to the opposition between individuality and generality. That is the reason why *recollection* of *I* and *memorization* of self are ascribed to "mutual obliteration". They are in such a relation that one of them is just an obstacle blocking off the projection of another.

It is undeniable that there are limitations in such a dichotomous way of thinking. Essentially, once the singularity of *I* has been forgotten, it does not follow that the generality of self would be established automatically. In actual fact, self would appear each time in different ways, according to the relationship between the self and the others. Quite similarly, the opposing factors such as collective and individual in regard to farming styles, do not always maintain the same meanings for people. On the contrary, they are evaluated differently each time according to the actual situations of recollection.

For a clearer picture of the subject, I would like to describe some instances of the Chuvash to illustrate people's memories of collectivization. Today's controversy over farming styles originated in the collectivization conducted under Stalin's

regime. The people's memories of collectivization give us good examples to pursue our investigation into the dynamics of memory, composed of official discourses and personal recollections.

4 Articulation of Difference over Collectivization

First, let us briefly review the historical process of collectivization. Farm collectivization started at the end of the 1920's, and the rate of collectivization increased from year to year in the Chuvash. More than half of the population belonged to collectives in the early 1930's, and the membership included three quarters of the farming population by 1938 (Shornikov 1990: 304).

During that period, some of the collective farmers organized propaganda brigades, and actively appealed to individual farmers (*edinolichniki*)²⁾ to join them. At the same time, while favorable farmland was issued to the collectives, individual farmers were given only poor quality land. They were also excluded from various social rights and securities. As a result, some of the farmers, who were unwilling to join collectives on any account, elected to migrate to other regions. The collectivization never completely controlled the farming population however, because some farmers in villages held out as *edinolichniki* or individual farmers.

In this way, the population was divided into collective farmers and *edinolichniki* during the period of collectivization from the 1930's to the 40's. The division of the social categories was eagerly promoted, and on occasion the difference between them was keenly articulated. One of the most typical cases was the investigative expedition into the life culture of farmers in 1933. The investigation was conducted by the Chuvash Scientific Research Institute under the direction of the Republic government, for the purpose of accelerating collectivization.

A document indicated that the research group, including medical officers, were divided into three parties and charged with going to 21 villages in 18 districts (*raion*) for a month, where they surveyed 23,032 persons from 4,885 households to ascertain the details of each farmer's lifestyle (Shornikov 1990: 405). The inquiries made by the research group in the investigation were about such trivial things that it seems to us even picayune. For example, the ownership of such material goods as lamps, and the usage of toiletries such as towels, soap, toothbrushes, razors, and even eau de Cologne; as well as shaving or bathing routines were documented. The answers were divided into those of the collective farmers (*kolkhozniki*) and the individual farmers (*edinolichniki*), and the percentage of the whole population was recorded item by item numerically. The result was tabulated so that one could distinguish at first glance the difference between *kolkhozniki* and *edinolichniki*. The following table is one that was rearranged to reflect the figures in the official report, which was published in the second year of the investigation.

Table 1. Comparison between *kolkhozniki* and *edinolichniki* in regards to *kul'turnost'* (Kuznetsov 1934)

	Kolkhozniki	Edinolichniki	All
Own lamps without smoke outlet. (%)	9.3	16.2	12.2
— 5-caliber lamps.	46.3	58.3	51.5
— 7-caliber lamps.	39.2	21.7	31.7
— 10-caliber lamps.	2.9	0.8	2.0
Use of separate towels in a family. (%)	55	51	53
Use of the same towel in a family.	45	49	47
The portion of those who brush their teeth in a family. (%)	28	14.7	22.3
— in the whole.	10.8	5.3	8.5
The number of tooth-brushes per 100 persons.	76	72	75
Take a bath more than once a week. (%)	74.6	71.7	73.4
— more than every two weeks.	94.9	91.4	93.3
— almost once a month.	2.9	4.5	3.6
Does not take a bath.	0.6	1.7	1.1
Uses cleansing soap. (%)	22.1	8.5	17.3
Uses washing soap.	20.3	13.6	18.4
The portion of families whose members often shave. (%)	79	56	69
The portion of families with a razor.	37.1	23.1	31.1
The number of razors per 100 people who shave.	48	42	46

The report was entitled “The *Kul'turnost'* of Collective Farmers is Rising”. As this title shows, the report articulated numerically the high rate of *kul'turnost'* of the collective farmers in comparison with the individual ones. The term *kul'turnost'* comes from the word of *kul'tura* (culture) and means, so to speak, “culturality”. The term came into use in Stalin's time, and it meant the unification of the value systems held by hitherto opposing bourgeois and intelligentsia. In other words, *kul'turnost'* was the synthetic value of consumer and cultural products, and at the same time, it was the index for propagation of demand for commodities (Kelly and Volkov 1998). The report made public the fact that collective farmers were better off economically and culturally than individual farmers.

Most attention should be paid to the functions that figures served in the report. A party activist and historicist Kuznetsov, who was responsible for the investigation, concluded the report with the following statement. “We must work on raising the culture of association and collective farmers, investigating further into concrete figures.” (Kuznetsov 1934: 36) As this statement shows, articulation by means of

numerical data was regarded as essential to the investigation. Figures were used as effective weapons to declare that the division of social categories was justified, because the categories were by no means demarcated arbitrarily, but according to the nature of each category, which could be ascertained only through scientific method. Demarcation and articulation of the difference on it were the things which happened most harshly on the time of collectivization.

5 Repetition of Reorganization

While a lot was made about the manifestations of the high rate of collective farmers' *kul'turnost'*, as a consequence of that, the farmers must have had a negative image of *edinolichniki*. An especially uncivilized force of sorcery or black magic was often associated with the negativity of *edinolichniki*.

This notion of sorcery in the Chuvash was originally compounded by both indigenous and Russian Orthodox elements, and such magic had been regarded as a force exercised by special persons in a specific period, usually on the occasion of the holiday after the planting season. However, at the time when a major conflict arose over the rights and wrongs of collectivization, such a view that regards sorcery as a weapon to harm enemies with, which might be used by those who are not specialists, but ordinary and uncultivated persons, was prevalent.

Such a way of looking at sorcery, held in common by the Chuvash in those days, is reflected clearly in memories today about concrete events of that time. Let us cite an episode from a Chuvash woman born in the 1930's. The woman said that her mother died when she was an infant. According to this woman, her mother was killed by sorcery because she was working as a propagandist for a collective, which set some villagers against her. Her memory in relation to the collectivization is tied to another ominous event.

Soon after the second baby was born to my stepmother, a villager woman came to my house and dandled the baby with praise, saying things like, "What a cute baby!" Then, having the woman gone, in a short time, the hitherto bouncing baby quickly became bad, and died soon. That woman must have killed the baby. It was said that she used sorcery, and she did not join the collective.

This woman's regarding a non-collective farmer in the same light as a sorcerer corresponds to the state discourse that regards *edinolichniki* as people with low *kul'turnost'*. These notions came from the people in favor of collectivization, as they imagined those against collectivization to be small-minded or malicious. Whether articulated in words or numerals, such views expand the negativeness further. In this way, an imaginative circle arises between imagery and articulation.

Meanwhile, knowledge is not always forged via the circulation of imagery and articulation, as a one-way stream from the center to the periphery, from the autho-

rized to the marginal. In other words, articulation is not always concerned with the image of *edinolichniki* imagined by collective farmers. Rather the circulation must be bilateral between *edinolichniki* and collective farmers.

Once the woman, to whom I referred above, went to a neighboring village with me, as we were invited as guests. On the next day, she felt down and out of sorts. She told me that she was not well, because she went to the neighboring village yesterday. When I asked her for the reason, she explained as follows.

My late husband was from that village, but I had not been there for a long time. My husband's house did not join the collective. What is worse, he committed crimes and was imprisoned several times. He had been ostracized in that village. When we visited yesterday, I met an old woman who knew about my husband. She just said, "Yeah, I know him", but her tone was malicious. I felt very uncomfortable, certainly because her evil eye affected me.

This latter case has something in common with the former case in that others' alleged malice is associated with the force of sorcery (the evil eye). Nevertheless, in light of relationships within the collectivization, the roles of sorcerer and sufferer are entirely reversed. In the former case, the wrongdoer-sorcerer was one of *edinolichniki*, who were regarded as those with lower *kul'turnost'* by state discourse, while in the latter case, it was one of the village's collective farmers who were suspected of sorcery. While in the former case the woman identified with her mother who had been a propagandist of a collective, in the latter case, she identified with her husband who had opposed the collectivization.

These two cases of a different manifestation of memory toward the same person illustrate that a certain social category is not always discerned in the same manner with the same evaluation. Rather, social categories are discerned and evaluated each time in different ways, according to the situation with whom he/she is concerned at the moment.

Unsteadiness in demarcation and evaluation of social category is found commonly among people living in a changing period. They have no choice but to transfer from one social category to another. A man of the neighbors of the woman mentioned above worked as a driver at collective before. But, in the course of decline of the collective, he has gone and started to work at a neighboring city. Now he has a comparatively big income, and is afraid of sorcery, which allegedly should be sent him from neighbors because of envy. His suspicion of sorcery is made from his self-identification as a deserter of collective. But, on the other hand, on the occasion of a quarrel with an officer, who had not practically worked at collective, the man boasts that he had worked at collective. In the latter case, he conjures up the memory of the past time, and identifies himself as one of collective workers.

Such a two-sided manifestation of memory may be pointed out as ambivalence of those who lived through the socialist times, when practically everyone was a

victim of the government, and might be an oppressor at the same time. In those comments, some particular patterns of people's recollection were referred, such as paranoid (Humphrey 2003) or comical mnemonic tropes (Pedersen 2006), by way of reactions to the ambivalence. In many cases, people's mnemonic narrative was referred as allegory, which should not be interpreted literally, but as something replaced with the actual experiences³. Those are on the same line with the view that personal memories should be placed in total opposition to official discourses (ex. Skultans 1998).

In actual fact, however, as Lass once suggested, the past is recollected following the indices of the official discourses, with which personal memories are composed into dialectically (Lass 1994). The past experiences are recollected, neither as compensations for, nor as alternative to, the hollow times which were suppressed by the official art of demarcation. However, as the Chuvash case shows, it is on the boundary of social categories that the awareness of the difference between self and others occurs, and relevant memory of the matters concerning both is recollected repeatedly to reorganize the current situation. That is so, even if the boundary had been created by the state's strong measures such as collectivization, and consolidated on occasion, having been articulated in official discourses.

6 Conclusion

The manner of recollection in the case of the Chuvash people shows that, while something is remembered, many other things are forgotten. However, their forgetting is by no means a loss of memory due to some pressure from outside such as the state's power. The obliviousness here should be rather taken as some kind of memory being suspended until it can be recollected. As Michael Taussig suggested, this very suspension evokes the retroactive force of memory (Taussig 1999: 136). The retroactivity is so futile, however, that recollection cannot but lead to another suspension. Consequently, the pattern of recollecting something and its suspension would repeat itself for one's whole life.

Under these circumstances, human memory cannot be established in such a stable way as the proponents of collective farming and their opponents conceived through the course of their controversy. Human memory then should not be taken so much like a projection of past experiences on the human mind. Rather, it is evoked as if it were illuminations flickering on the critical point between suspension and recollection. In the Chuvash case, the critical point of recollection corresponds to a large extent with the social category created by the collectivization. No matter how artificial and even fabricated it may be, the boundary between collective farmers and *edinolichniki* was the point that made each person aware of the difference between him or herself and others, and conjured up social knowledge with which both were concerned.

Thus, the question is not what are the norms or properties within a category demarcated by boundaries, but whether one is aware of the distinctiveness of self on the boundaries. In other words, it is not considered that there should be a “correct memory” to be liberated from suppression before it has been forgotten. Rather, memory of past is always provided with possibilities that may be recollected differently at each time of recollection, according to the distinctiveness of self which one is aware in the relation to the others. The distinctiveness of self is more often than not become aware on the boundary which had been articulated by official discourses.

Memory therefore has a structure like mutual implication, in which memory and the memorized items should include each other. In this account, the dichotomous way of thinking is inadequate between the generality of memory and the individuality of recollection, as well as the dichotomy between official discourses and personal mnemonic activity. These pairings, which appear to oppose each other, in fact, work together inseparably and actually depend on each other.

Notes

- 1) This is the revised version of the paper presented at the International Conference on *Ideals, Narratives and Practices of Modernities in Former and Current Socialist Countries* (National Museum of Ethnology, 19–20th March 2010). I really appreciate the opportunity that the organizers allowed me. And I would like to thank other conference members who gave me profitable comments.
- 2) The word *edinolichniki* literally means “single private managers”. The word was used to indicate the opposing persons against the collective workers, *kolkhozniki*, sometimes with an insulting nuance.
- 3) Such a replacement of memory is also supported by Berdahl. Explaining how the past official history was reconsidered in the transition period at a village on the border between the former East and West Germany, she described as follows; “In contrast to many post-socialist societies, in which new histories are being created out of formerly unsanctioned memories of the past, the discrediting of old official histories in the former GDR has been almost instantaneously *replaced* with the imposition of new ones” (Berdahl 1999: 219–220) [*Italics mine*].

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