Governing the Souls of Chinese Modernity

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Abstract: Philippe Descola argues that human societies can be categorized by the ways in which they utilize broad assumptions about interiority and physicality, where interiority refers to something similar to what Edward Tyler and James Frazer meant by "soul".  In Descola's scheme, traditional Chinese culture, which gives play to infinite variability in both interiority and physicality, is strongly "analogist".  In contrast, Descola defines modern, Western societies as "naturalist".  We moderns see nature or physicality as universally fixed, but culture or interiority as variable.  Contemporary China is rapidly modernizing and scientizing.  In Descola's terms, its culture should be transitioning from an analogist one to a naturalist one.  Through an examination of practices of memorialisation and funerary ritual in urban China, as well as Chinese Communist Party attempts to steer the evolution of these practices in reaction to "modernity," this paper attempts to tease out what is modern about the conceptions of soul implicit in contemporary Chinese dealings with death.