



MEDITATION

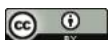
Recombinant analogism and naturalism

Stephan FEUCHTWANG, *London School of Economics*

Comment on Kipnis, Andrew. “Governing the souls of Chinese modernity” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (2): 217–238.

In his book on how the towns and villages of Zouping, in the eastern province of Shandong in China, became a small city, Andrew Kipnis (2016) describes the process of additive change and alteration as “recombinant,” a term he repeats here. He takes it from genetics and he means to keep from that analogy the idea that a new genetic chain, made out of elements old and new, or modified, becomes a program of reproduction of the present, from which further reproduction can of course also add and modify. The evolutionary analogy is reinforced in his argument with and inspiration by Philippe Descola’s distinction between analogism and naturalism, because analogism stands in the place of premodernity and naturalism in the place of modernity.

Descola’s scheme is evolutionary although without analogy to genetic modification, because in his universal scheme animist and totemic modes of identification come before but never precede the naturalist, only analogist modes do. So, not only is Andrew Kipnis still prone to the assumptions of the nature/culture divide, as he disarmingly avows despite having been convinced that he had got over it in his thinking, he is also prone to what Descola drives him and us to conclude: that human modes of identification present to us a universal history that ends with naturalism and modernity. Chinese modernity is just one case, with its own peculiarities, and if Kipnis is right, then any or all other transitions to modernity could combine analogical with naturalist modes of identification. That is the species being. The recombinant program he finds in China is a subspecies.



Thinking ourselves into animist modes of identification, be they through the Achua via Descola or the Runa via Kohn, may rid us of universalizing the nature/culture divide. Via Kohn and the Avila Runa, we can think of nonhuman lives as selves with souls. But to do so doesn't rid us of nature/culture becoming the telos of a universal history, whether or not you specify it as capitalism, imperialism, and postcolonialism, or as urbanization and industrialization, or the result of the scientific revolution.

Kipnis' focus is on death rituals and in particular on the subject matter of souls, necessarily and helpfully distinguished from the more transient "spirits" of living humans. What are the souls of modernized humans, he asks, and answers that they are both analogical and naturalist. Yes, we can distinguish naturalist from analogical souls, but not definitively, since both ancestors and the Communist Party have souls.

Transformation from agrarian to industrial and urban living and settlement involves, everywhere, less land for burial, less face-to-face living with neighbors, more geographical mobility, smaller family households, greater individual income and aspirations and therefore some further individuation of our souls and their fate. But in the Chinese urban world it involves a continued but modified and diminished cult of ancestors, and in the People's Republic of China it also involves the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party seeking to guide the processes of change and having its own soul. Just as it sought to control a demographic transition that might anyway have occurred, it tries to control the shortening and the changes in the nature of death rituals that might anyway have occurred. Those controls are, on Kipnis' evidence, both prevalent and inadequate even in cities where state-registered "one-stop dragons" (as the providers of funeral arrangements call themselves) undertake nearly all funerals and disposal of ashes. As Kipnis puts it in this article, "Although these writings [by advocates of Party policy] suggest that modernity will bring about ritual change in itself, they also demand that the Party take the lead in guiding society through this modernization." With reason. The way the market takes over and accedes to demands that might otherwise be condemned as unscientific and superstitious, the accommodation of forms of superstitious funerals, increasing signs of Mao's deification, the elaborate funerals of the highest ranked, the way grief is politicized into grievance, all these exceed political control and have to be accommodated in those controls. Kipnis' article describes all this wonderfully.

The Party is the source of ideological inspiration and then response to the hierarchies of status in urban dwelling, both for living residents and for the dead, in ranks of housing and burial class, placed in the hands of property developers and graveyard and funeral firms. They are equally wonderful demonstrations of how hegemonic ideology has worked through the market. But we must come back to the basic anthropological question.

What, for Kipnis, is the soul of naturalist or modern humans? It seems to be the human desire for the dead to have continuity as a fulfillment for their own wishes for continuity, as family or as fame, or status, however limited in its social scope. *Soul* is the name for that which lasts, bearing the aspiration for immortality. "Bodies are natural so they are mortal; but the souls of culture may be immortal. For the souls of culture to live on, they must be embodied by other humans," writes

Kipnis. They have to be made immortal, just as they did in premodern times. What is modern is the element of choice and the substance of immortalization, a career (although that is close to the mastery of a trade or craft in the premodern), self-sacrifice for a family (ditto the premodern but its greater precarity in the modern context), or a belonging to a tradition (premodern), now a religion or a nation or an ethnicity.

In what way is this *naturalist* rather than just ontological in every mode of identification, including analogical? I think it is modern in the attenuated conditions of urban, mobile life, in which we live with strangers indifferent to our presence. Otherwise, the aspiration to ensure immortality of self, through an image created in ritual and in other practices of self-cultivation, individuated as a member of a category (such as a totemic group or just a human “us”) or a group (such as a family), seems to me to be a human universal. Only if you equate modernity with naturalism is it naturalist. In addition, to Kipnis via Descola, the immortalization of a human soul is analogical in China because offerings to the dead are like sacrifice and sacrifice is peculiar to analogical modes of identification, creating links between what Kipnis calls “singularities.”

At this point I have further difficulty accepting both Kipnis and Descola, as Kipnis registers in footnote 3. Death rituals in China have for millennia been the means of creating ancestors out of ghosts. The ritual offerings are not a way of connecting or ordering singularities, which is the premise of Descola’s claim that sacrifice is peculiar to analogism. Sacrificial offerings create what is then separated, connect to the separated (the rite is a form of identification), and then perform a separation from them, in this case ancestors but also ghosts, gods, and demons.

Missing from Kipnis’ investigations of death rituals is the condition of being forgotten, a ghost, which in every exposition I have heard and read is the primary condition, in the sense of the “already” effect of death. The prime importance of the death ritual is that it transforms not only the biography of a remembered person into a standardized eulogy but into a remembered, which is to say named, ancestor. Even the curtailed versions of death ritual offered by one-stop dragons do this. They create what is a blessing, an ancestor with descendants. The ancestor does not only have an effect, she or he *is* the effect—unlike a god, who is a past human who in death does affect the living, or a ghost who also affects the living and their effectivity is respectively petitioned or exorcised by ritual means. I fail to see how this is analogical, since the rites create what is then separated, or they petition or propitiate what has been separated, for a moment creating recognition by and with a deity or a ghost and then separating again. The rites do the identification, the creation, and the separation. They are neither naturalist nor analogical.

What might be thought to be typically analogical are the correlative schemes by which the day for a funeral is selected. In rural towns and villages, Daoist ritual experts or geomancers provide this service. Kipnis doesn’t say whether it is provided by the one-stop dragons or by someone they employ. In any case, urban life does not exclude this cosmology of correlation because it is still the means of fate calculation in consultations by, for instance, business people. Nor does it exclude ghosts. Robert Weller and Wu Keping (2017) have described diagnoses of illness as the work of ghosts in cities near Nanjing where Kipnis conducted fieldwork.

The correlative schemata, systematically used in Hangzhou, near the Nanjing site of Kipnis' investigations, have been described as homologism by William Matthews (2017), who points out that they are combined with theories of the universe in physics, meteorology, and other results of the scientific revolution as well as with the looser, less systematic references to parts of the same cosmology in traditional Chinese medicine or in deity worship. We might as well call them "analogism" but without the assumption of singularities as I have argued. But what the case of China's accession to modernity and scientific naturalism undoubtedly shows us is a combination of more than one mode of identification with that of naturalism, as Kipnis points out.

On this at least we agree.

References

- Feuchtwang, Stephan 2014. "Too Ontological, too rigid, too ahistorical but magnificent." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (3): 383–87.
- Kipnis, Andrew. 2016. *From village to city: Social transformation in a Chinese county seat*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Matthews, William. 2017. "Ontology with Chinese characteristics: Homology as a mode of identification." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (1): 265–85.
- Weller, Robert, and Wu Keping. 2017. "Overnight urbanization and religious change: Non-equilibrium ecosystems in southern Jiangsu." Paper presented Enigma of Change and Continuity in China Conference, University of Cologne, July 2017.

Stephan Feuchtwang
Department of Anthropology
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
United Kingdom
S.Feuchtwang@lse.ac.uk