

ONENESS AND ‘THE CHURCH IN TAIWAN’

Anthropology Is Possible without Relations but Not without Things

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Abstract: Worldwide followers of the late Chinese Christian reformers Watchman Nee and Witness Lee share a central concern with human-divine ‘oneness’, but there are different understandings in different localities about how such oneness works. I utilize one such difference by analyzing group unity in Euro-America using Taiwanese understandings of oneness, which involve things (selfsame unities) but not relations. Experimenting with Dumontian, Strathernian, and object-oriented anthropologies, I show that anthropological analysis is currently possible (a) by emphasizing things, (b) by emphasizing relations, and (c) entirely without relations. Anthropology entirely without things, however, has not yet been achieved. I conclude by suggesting reasons why we might want to attain this final possibility in our approach to things and/or relations.

Keywords: Christianity, comparison, Dumont, object-oriented ontology, relations, Strathern, Taiwan

Despite being a perpetual problem of anthropological analysis, the role of ‘things’ (or ‘entities’ or ‘objects’) and ‘relations’ in anthropology has recently raised a more explicit and acute question mark. Due to a steadily growing appreciation of the work of Marilyn Strathern in particular (Gell 1999; Holbraad and Pedersen 2009; Lebner 2020), the concept of the relation has undergone renewed scrutiny. This has led to two further lines of argumentation. First, that anthropology of late has overemphasized relations in social life (Scott 2014; Yarrow et al. 2015) and has even associated relationality automatically with moral and sensory positivity (Carsten 2013). Second, that although we might critique, stretch, and historicize the concept of the relation, there is little



possibility of anthropology ever going beyond the relation (Lebner 2017a: 18; Strathern 2020: 10–12). There has also been a growing implicit recognition of the over-reliance of anthropology upon relationality after the relative demise of the concepts of 'society' and 'the individual' in anthropological theory (Strathern 1996a), with renewed attempts at theorizing social entities under rubrics such as 'infrastructure' (Larkin 2013), 'assemblages' (Ong and Collier 2005), and 'the subject' (Laidlaw et al. 2018).

This article aims to gather together and contribute to these dispersed approaches by introducing the idea that the question of the role of things and relations in anthropological analysis can be asked from either a 'both/and' or an 'either/or' perspective. From the both/and perspective, I show that the focus on relations or things is only a question of emphasis. From the either/or perspective, it is a question of whether or not analysis is possible entirely in the key of 'things' or entirely in the key of 'relations'. I demonstrate the possibility of an either/or focus on only things, while suggesting that anthropological analysis relying solely on relations has yet to be achieved.¹ Thus, within this article I explore three of four options: relations (1) and things (2) as both/and foci, and things as an either/or focus (3). An either/or focus on relations (4), however, is still an unattained analytic. Finally, I suggest reasons why such an attainment might be desirable. Before unfolding this argument further, I turn now to the ethnographic material that will form the basis of the analyses that follow.

Ethnography

Part 1: 'the church'

In the early 1920s on an island in the Min River, just outside the bustling port city of Fuzhou in southeastern China, the young Christian enthusiast Ni Shuzu, later to become Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903–1972), and an elderly rebel, the British missionary Margaret E. Barber (1866–1929), formed a life-changing bond amid the social, political, and psychological chaos of the time. Under Barber's tutelage, Nee was deeply affected by the eschatological writings of the Irish aristocrat John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), by the tripartite biblical anthropology of the Welsh holiness preacher Jesse Penn-Lewis (1861–1927), and by the mystical musings of the French Catholic nun Madame Guyon (1648–1717). These teachings would form the foundations of his own Christian ministry, which would in turn make Nee "the most influential Chinese Christian writer, evangelist, and church builder" (Smith 2009). Today, among Chinese figures, writes Paul Chang (2017: 2), Nee's "popularity outside of China is exceeded only by Confucius, Laozi, and Mao Zedong." Barber was more than a teacher though. She also became Nee's "spiritual mother," credited by

his followers for the “foundation and perfecting of his spiritual life” (Reetzke 2005: 115; see also Lee 1991: 127). The motherly bond between Barber and Lee laid the basis for the growth and worldwide expansion—under the leadership of Nee’s spiritual protégé, Witness Lee (Li Changshou, 1905–1997)—of a highly integrated, theologically focused transnational group. With up to 2 million members, it understands itself today to be ‘the Lord’s recovery’ (*zhu de huifu*) of ‘the church’ (*zhaohui*), of ‘Christianity’ (*jidujiao*), and of ‘the Body of Christ’ (*jidu de shenti*).

In its complicated 100-year history, beginning in China and spreading out across 65 countries today, the group has been variously referred to by outsiders as ‘the Local Church’ (*difang jiaohui*), ‘the Shouters’ (*huhan pai*), ‘the Recovery Church’ (*huifu jiaohui*), ‘Christian Assembly Hall’ (*jidutu juhui suo*), and ‘the Little Flock’ (*xiao qun*). The group itself, however, resists being named as such. It is referred to from within, globally, as ‘the church’ (*zhaohui*), and regionally as ‘the church in [the name of a nation, city, or neighborhood]’. The church’s ‘ministry’ (*zhishi*) consists of a relatively unique, detailed, and extensive set of ideas concerning the importance of ‘oneness’ (*heyi wu jian*).

Among participants in ‘the church in Taiwan’ with whom I conducted fieldwork, I heard the term ‘oneness’ and its synonyms many times. “We are one!!” (*women shi yiii!*) was the church version of ‘Cheeeese!!’ which—as we moved about in the city, went to hot spring baths and city farms, took urban mountain walks, or visited museums, cake factories, teahouses, and exercise classes—was uttered every time a group photograph was taken. These concerns, however, are worldwide. Of all the various aspects and themes of the Bible and Christian history, oneness is the singular focus around which the life and ministry of ‘the church’ as an international entity revolves. At a gathering of 30,000 church members from around the world, held over Chinese New Year in 2015, oneness was a central focus. The “general subject” of the gathering, which was referred to as both a “conference” (*tehui*) and a “feast” (*yan*), was “the main contents of the Lord’s recovery” (*zhu de huifu zhi zhuyao neirong*), “the Lord’s recovery” being a term the church uses to describe itself. “Message one” was entitled “The Church Ground of Oneness versus Division” (*zhaohui yi de lichang yu fenlie xiangdui*). Of the 20 roman numeral points throughout the conference outline, half of them had the word ‘oneness’ or ‘One’ (*yi*) in them.

In this article, following church members’ own understanding that ‘the church’ is the same everywhere, I am going to interpret the oneness of the church as a description of its ‘thinghood’. That is, in order to make these understandings speak to the anthropological issues introduced above, I understand references to the oneness of the church as references to both the qualitative and quantitative degree to which it is a ‘thing’. A thing here, then, is that which is ‘one with’ or ‘the same as’ itself. In relation to the thinghood of ‘the church’, there are two key ethnographic distinctions I make in the article. Those who

have vocally critiqued 'the church' in Europe and North America are seen by church members as representatives of Christianity. So first I ethnographically distinguish between (a) those who are concerned with 'the church' as a thing, who understand themselves to be 'inside' it, and who I refer to collectively as 'the church in Euro-America' (CEA), and (b) those who are also concerned with 'the church' as a thing but see themselves as being 'outside' of it, whose faith I refer to as 'Euro-American Christianity' (EAC). I suggest that this first ethnographic distinction, between CEA and EAC, can be analyzed from two influential anthropological perspectives. The first perspective, represented by Louis Dumont, I argue, analytically prioritizes 'things' (selfsame ones). The second perspective, represented by Marilyn Strathern, analytically prioritizes the 'relation', which I define accordingly as that which is shared between two otherwise different things.

The second ethnographic distinction is not between CEA and EAC but between the CEA/EAC difference and 'the church in Taiwan', which I refer to using the Chinese pinyin term *taiwan zhaohui*. This seemingly ethnographic distinction is in fact, for me, not an ethnographic distinction as such. Rather, it is a distinction between an ethnography of the difference between CEA and EAC and an analysis of this difference drawn from my understanding of the approach to the oneness (or thinghood) of 'the church' taken in Taiwan. This approach is different from that taken in UK, European, and North American church localities, but it is nonetheless an alternative way of understanding the system that has evolved there. This rather convoluted-seeming ethnographic-cum-analytic process of showing that the distinction between CEA and EAC looks different depending on the analytical method utilized (Dumontian, Strathernian, or 'the church in Taiwanese') is in service of a more specific point. Framed as a challenge to anthropologists who have claimed that anthropological analysis without the concept of relations is impossible, my argument is that this impossibility is the case only if one takes a both/and approach to things and relations. *Taiwan zhaohui* reveals the possibility of an either/or approach, which not only makes analysis without relations possible, but also highlights that it is analysis without *things* that has proven impossible so far. Before moving on to the difference between CEA and EAC, it seems necessary that I briefly describe how I became familiar with 'the church' in European, North American, and Taiwanese contexts.

Part 2: 'the church' in Euro-America

Growing up in the UK, my parents joined what their Christian friends at the time called a "Chinese church" when I was 12. The life of our family shifted in many ways at that time, but a key difference demarcating the period before and after this transition, in my memory, is the taste and shape of the Eucharist

bread. Joining “the church,” as we called it, was precipitated 15 years earlier by what might be understood as an instance of ‘reverse Christian globalization’ (cf. Cohen 2009). Before I was born, my father, a Catholic Liverpoolian quantity surveyor and football enthusiast, read a book by Watchman Nee called *The Normal Christian Life*. The book inspired him to leave what Nee, and now he, called “Christianity” for good, and to discover the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Plymouth Brethren, from whom Nee drew inspiration. In accordance with Nee’s ministry, my parents met several times a week in our living room with a few other Christians who, after reading Nee, were also disillusioned with Christianity. They wrote their own hymns, baked their own Eucharist bread and communed over their mutual love for Nee’s teachings and biblical exegeses.

Based on 1 Corinthians 5:8,² the bread my mother baked on Sunday mornings was unleavened. But all that I, my siblings, and my age-mates knew was that it was fragrant and tasty. A dense, doughy, sweet lump, topped with a flaky crust, it probably did more to keep our little group together than we realized. Still, the bread was evidently small consolation for the adults, who had renounced a more socially expansive Christian life for the isolated pursuit of a set of ‘recovered truths’ that few other Christians around them cared to recognize. Only after 15 years of periodically being dissolved and resurrected, of losing members and gaining them, of combining with other groups and detaching from them did our small collective change irreversibly on discovering that Nee had in fact produced a spiritual heir—Witness Lee. Moreover, we learned that there were thousands of other Christianity-rejecting groups like ours who were putting Nee and Lee’s ‘vision’ into practice. We had found what we would come to know as ‘the church’.

After making contact with this globally interconnected group, the standardized disk wafers that we now blessed and cracked into tiny tasteless shards with a white cloth on Sunday mornings paled in comparison to the heavy, doughy lump we had torn pieces from before. Of course, this was not a major concern at the time; I associate the two breads with these two life stages only in retrospect. This was just one of innumerable changes that occurred: people from all over the world visiting our house, sleeping on our sofa and coming to live in our city; regular trips to church conferences, trainings, and meetings across the UK, Europe, and the US; new songs and ways of speaking, acting, and thinking; new friends from far-off places; and the prospect as a ‘young person’ of one day being ‘trained’ full-time at one of the 17 church training centers for university graduates. Life had shifted from an insular but intimate, home-based rejection of institutional Christianity to a world-facing embrace of a global group with too many faces and names to remember. While the doughy unleavened lump had the flavor of home, the disk wafer tasted of a much larger entity.³

Part 3: 'the church' in Euro-America and Euro-American Christianity

The same understanding of Christianity is still broadly shared, as far as I am aware, by members of 'the church' everywhere. Since Nee's time, it has been believed that Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic, is 'degraded' (*sichen*). Because of its neglect of 'the matter of oneness', Christianity is said to be ignorant of the 'innermost organ' (*zui nei de qiguan*)—that of the 'spirit' (*ling*), which Nee and Lee made a strong point of distinguishing sharply from the 'soul' (*hun*). The oneness of the church is maintained through the oneness of each member's spirit with everyone else's and with God's spirit. Denominationalism is perceived as the 'soulish' dismemberment of the Body of Christ. Having more than one name for the church, Witness Lee often said, is like having more than one moon, or like a "monster" having more than one body (cf. Lee [1998] 2020: chap. 10, sect. 3). The only divisions in 'the church', according to church members, should be geographical: each city should contain a single church, and each church should maintain constant contact with all others. Social fragmentation for members of 'the church' equates to divine fragmentation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the oneness of 'the church' is perceived differently by those inside and outside of it. Members of the North American evangelical mainstream began labeling the group a 'cult' soon after Witness Lee moved to the US in the early 1960s. Disgruntled ex-members and hostile Christian outsiders have found doing so both therapeutically (e.g., Foldy 2016) and theologically (e.g., Geisler and Rhodes n.d.) justified. In the publications that accuse 'the church' of being a cult, a familiar charge of brainwashing is leveled against them. One such publication is called *The Mindbenders* (Sparks 1977), while the front cover of another, *The God-Men* (Duddy and SCP 1981), features a sketch of a smirking Witness Lee with the outstretched arms of his followers reflected in his seemingly hypnosis-inducing glasses. This is about both the over-inclusion of insiders and the under-inclusion of outsiders. Aside from the affront to free will that group membership poses for many critics, there were evidently feelings of aesthetic and even ethnic exclusion behind the group's treatment in the US compared to East Asia. After describing one of the group's 'gospel marches' in Taipei, one account asks with indignation: "Can you imagine the amazement of Saturday shoppers in downtown Los Angeles when a hoard of 1,200 or 1,300 robed marchers streamed down Broadway in just such a fashion!" (Sparks 1977: 231).

Even those Euro-American Christians outside 'the church' who reason that it is in fact not a cult are instructive for understanding the differences between how the unity, the sameness, the oneness (in a word, the 'thingliness') of the group is understood by those inside and outside of it. In 2009, a group of 'counter-cult researchers' recanted their earlier assessments of the group in a special issue of the *Christian Research Journal*, published by the Christian

Research Institute (CRI). Dedicated to “the ‘Local Church’ Movement,” the issue is entitled “We Were Wrong.” One author writes that “for Westerners, the LC’s distinctively Chinese approach to Christianity, even when represented by Western followers, was so unfamiliar as to suggest cultism, whether or not it existed” (CRI 2009: 29).

Some counter-cult researchers were evidently perturbed in particular by the figure of Lee, described as “energetic and authoritarian” (Kinneer, cited in Martin 1980: 380) and as “the autonomous dictator of this world-wide religious cult” (Sparks 1977: 221). The CRI special issue, heartily embraced by many church members in North America, domesticates and denominationalizes the distinction between “the LC” and other Christian groups, concluding that “the LC has been misunderstood and is neither cultic nor aberrant, but merely different” (CRI 2009: 3). The subsequent acceptance of the group in some quarters thus arises from an altered perception: the difference between this group and other Christian groups is not greater than the differences between those other groups. In the concluding article of the CRI special issue, Gretchen Pasantino addresses the Western perception of Lee’s style directly: “Lee’s heritage was Eastern, not Western, and consequently did not reflect the rational, didactic, Aristotelian exposition familiar to us, causing us to suspect theological error rather than mere cultural difference” (ibid.: 49).

The hostility to the group arose from the perception that the relations within it were stronger than those beyond it. The renewed understanding of those internal relations as arising passively from ‘mere cultural difference’, rather than being actively embraced over external relations with other Christians and with God, allayed concerns for many people. Nonetheless, looking from inside the group today, internal relations are indeed actively embraced.

Before going to Taiwan, I interviewed church members in the UK, the most memorable interview being with Lily. She is an Iranian who went to high school and university in California where she completed the church’s ‘full-time training’. Church gatherings are often referred to as ‘blendings’. When I asked Lily if she could clarify this term, she referred me to and explained Leviticus 2:1–16, in which the Israelites’ preparation for a sacrificial meal offering to God is described. Here the component parts are crushed together and then blended into a paste using oil. While the parts are the soul-based cultural and personal differences between church members, these differences are not just ground away but into each other through church participation, which enables the flow of ‘the spirit’ (the oil) through those gathered. Lily gave a pertinent example of this understanding in action from a weekly meeting she had attended. She spoke of a “brother” who, when “the saints” were reading about the biblical Persian conquest of Babylon, said something like “Oh, those blooming Iranians.” This split Lily in two: on the one hand, she thought about the offense this comment caused in her ‘Iranian’ soul; on the other, she felt the comment was

also an opportunity to leave behind her “old self” and be further blended into the oneness of ‘the church’.

I asked Lily whether she ever worried about being “blended away” or “losing her identity” through this process of socio-spiritual incorporation. In her answer, she used the metaphor of the wall running around the circumference of the millennial city of God. Church members were the “living stones” (1 Peter 2:4–5) of this wall. She assured me that she did not “want God to make a bunch of Christ robots.” She emphasized instead that only she could occupy her particular place in the wall, not because this was a predestined space reserved for her “in heaven,” but exactly by virtue of her spiritual growth as a church member. Perfection was a process of finding one’s place within the wall. Lily understood the (sometimes abrasive) interactions with other church members as part of a mutual process of being reshaped according to the oneness of the wall. This process should not be understood as losing one’s personality but as exchanging a soul-based ‘old self’ for a spirit-based ‘vessel-hood’ in the blended body of Christ.

I need not invoke Pink Floyd to suggest that being a brick in a wall, holy or not, while valued positively by Lily, could intuitively be utilized as a negative image by Euro-American critics of ‘the church’. Lily’s mereographic compromise between oneness and individuality is resonant with anti-cult images of brainwashing. In both cases, participation in the church is a process of self-transformation. This transformation is directly proportional to the degree to which one is integrated within the collective. The individual(istic) self before integration is lost to the holistic self afterward. Deconversion likewise is a rupture in the process of individual-becoming-collective. When one loses connection to the collective, one loses connection to oneself—an outcome that I can attest to.

CEA is a group entity that is gradually becoming divinized through the intermingling and increasing oneness of its members. It is God who made this possible in the first place, church members say, with his “incarnation, human living, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and dispensation” as Christ. However, the principal Christian aim today is not to contact God as an external being, but to live God out as a collective being—as ‘the church’ or the ‘corporate godman’, as this being is sometimes called. In contrast, EAC, in church members’ eyes (but I would venture in many Euro-American Christian eyes too) is a collection of individuals each of whom is trying in different ways to contact God as a relatively external figure. For them, ‘church’ is not the central divine object of their concern; rather, it is the context or the means by which they each attempt to experience the presence of an otherwise external God. Relations among Christian human beings may help with this for EAC, but they are secondary to this endeavor, rather than primary (as with CEA). The question for us is, what do we do analytically with these differences between CEA and EAC understandings

of what it means to be Christian? I am first turning to an anthropological answer to this question, which, I argue, emphasizes things over relations.

Analysis

First Analytical Approach: Dumontian Comparison

The difference between ‘Euro-American Christianity’ and ‘the church in Euro-America’ may already be reminiscent, for some, of the comparison Louis Dumont ([1966] 1980, 1992) makes between individualism and holism. Dumont argues that the latter is present in germinal form at the beginning of Christian history. With holism, which was characteristic of the Vedic period in India and most of the ancient world, according to Dumont, each individual finds value to the degree that they embody a social position given by a shared vision of the transcendental social whole. This kind of system, Dumont (1983) argues, does allow for individualism, but only ‘outworldly individualism’. That is, one values one’s individuality to the degree that one lives outside the social whole, outside the world, as with the ancient ‘renouncers’, who by no means considered their way of life to be the proper life for most people. The renouncer was, by definition, an exceptional person, “an individual-outside-the-world” (ibid.: 3). Although Christianity first arose in a broadly holistic world, Dumont argues, it had within itself the seeds of an outworldly individualism with a communal aspect. According to Dumont, this latter aspect was not discernible within pre-Christian Indo-European civilizations: otherworldly individuals in Hellenistic and Vedic times were solitary. “Sociologically speaking,” he writes, “the emancipation of the individual through a personal transcendence, and the union of outworldly individuals in a community that treads on the earth but has its heart in heaven, may constitute a passable formula for Christianity” (ibid.: 7).

Dumont traces the gradual disintegration of the Church (not ‘the church’) in Western Europe as the defining factor of Christian life up until the arrival of John Calvin with whom the significance of the Church disappears almost entirely. “His Church is the last form that the Church could possibly take without disappearing,” Dumont (1983: 20) writes. From now on, “the Church does not make the believers what they are, but the believers make the Church what she is” (Schneckenburger, quoted in Troeltsch [1912] 1922: 320; quoted in Dumont 1983: 24). “For all practical purposes,” Dumont concludes, following the Reformation, the Church had become “an association composed of individuals” (ibid.). Any valued image of a whole into which this pursuit should fit is highly subordinate, if not totally non-existent.

The result of a Dumont-inspired analysis of the difference between CEA and EAC would take into account two things: the relatively selfsame ideologies

of Christian holism and of individualism, respectively.⁴ In order to arrive at these two things, we would have to rely on descriptions of several sets of relations, such as those between Lily and other church members, or between Lily and her understanding of the oneness of 'the church' (as a kind of wall). We would discuss concomitant relations (or lack thereof) between Euro-American Christian individualists, and between them and their idea of the divine. Finally, we would describe the relations between these two groups, as Dumont does historically in his description of Christian individualism gradually arising from a holistic world. We might even suggest that Euro-American Christian individualism is partly reinforced by the fear of (a form of relation with) the perceived potential for cultism in Christian groups. Likewise, we might propose that Lily's Christian holism is partly in response to her negative perception of (again, a relation with) Euro-American Christian individualism.

Nonetheless, if we are to stick to the Dumontian spirit of the analysis, all these relations would ultimately be analytically subservient to our conclusion that there exist two things here: Euro-American Christian holism and Euro-American Christian individualism. Certain relations (i.e., shared attributes) between these two might even be elided in order to emphasize their distinct thingliness. In contrast, we might underemphasize the thingliness of individualism and holism and merely use the distinction between the two as the pretext for centering our analysis on relations. What are the processes, we might ask, whereby Dumontian analysis produces conceptual things? What is hidden and what is exposed, and by what means, in the production of holism and individualism? I turn now to an alternative form of analysis, one that puts stress precisely upon relations over the things that are related.

Second Analytical Approach: Strathernian Relations

Before continuing, here is a quick summary of the rest of the article. As others have often noted, Marilyn Strathern's approach is very complex, and in this subsection I first try to clarify it by describing the place of 'things' and 'relations' within it. I argue that there are two kinds of things in Strathern's approach: heuristic things and 'really real' things. The point here is to show that, despite the prioritization of the relation and the attempt to desubstantialize the thing, Strathern's approach complements that of Dumont on the both/and side of the four-fold framing of the issue of the role of things and relations in anthropological analysis that I propose. Dumont prioritizes things, Strathern relations, but both things and relations as I have defined them are present for both. As I did with Dumont's approach, I will then briefly describe what a Strathernian approach to the difference between CEA and EAC might look like. In the subsection that follows this one, I am finally in a position to 'fill in' the third quadrant of the four-fold system I am proposing, that is, the thing-based

either/or quadrant. In the conclusion I will draw upon the approach to oneness in *taiwan zhaohui* before issuing a challenge to relational thinkers to fill in the final quadrant—a relation-based either/or approach.

Strathern (1995) traces her own interest in ‘the relation’ to a fascination with the ways in which the classical anthropology of her education sought to place the individual within society (see also Viveiros de Castro and Fausto 2017). Her own analytics, however, elide the ‘mereographic’ (part-whole) ‘relata’ (i.e., things) that so concerned her intellectual ancestors (Strathern 1996b), to explore the “dazzling” potential of relations set free from their conceptual subservience to the things they relate (Munro 2005: 246). Her focus, nonetheless, is not merely to describe the world as relational. Reflexively, Strathern (2014, 2020) recognizes that the very notion of the relation (a ‘duplex’ with both abstract and concrete meaning in English) is thoroughly ‘Euro-American’ (a term I have borrowed from her), with roots, in its current form, in seventeenth-century Britain. So much so that for anthropology in the English language, Strathern and her interpreters argue, there is practically no escaping the relation (Lebner 2017a: 18; Strathern 2020: 10–12). In contrast, Strathern is very much set on escaping, analytically, from the thing.

As is well known, Strathern’s first fieldwork took place in Melanesia. However, it is also true, as Ashley Lebner (2017a: 6) cautions, that at least from *The Gender of the Gift* onward, Strathern (1988) is writing about ‘Melanesia’ rather than Melanesia. The former is a ‘persuasive fiction’ (Strathern 1987) rather than a substantive really real thing. Strathern is very much attuned to the fact that the Melanesia she writes about is not the living, breathing Pacific region that continues to shift and change, far from Cambridge University (Holbraad and Pederson 2009). Thus, ‘Melanesia’ here, unlike Dumont’s individualism or holism, which are things out in the world impacting people’s lives, thoughts, and actions, is a heuristic thing. It is a thing, we will see, that is constructed in the writing of the anthropologist solely for the work of drawing relations. But it is a thing, nonetheless.

While giving the things in her analyses—such as ‘Melanesia’ and ‘Euro-America’—the least ontological substance possible outside of those analyses, there are also things at the root of Strathern’s approach that do not appear to be heuristic. As noted, Strathern is acutely aware of the limitations of her descriptions. “Limit” and “limitation” are words she uses often (Street and Copeman 2014: 19). She is reflexive about being ‘within the limits of a certain language’ (Viveiros de Castro and Fausto 2017) and about the historical idiosyncrasy of the concept of relations, which is the content and medium of her work (Strathern 2020). To me, this strongly suggests that something like ‘Euro-America’, as well as being a merely heuristic thing in her analyses, is also a really real thing for Strathern, from within which her analyses occur. In an interview with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Carlos Fausto (2017: 48), Strathern describes

a changing relationship with her data when she shifted from an external 'in' to an internal one, from working with Melanesians to a focus on (reproductive technologies in) Western society: "As a guest in Papua New Guinea, I felt I couldn't take issue with the material. I was at liberty to do what I damn well wanted to do in my own society."

References to being 'in' a society, to historical and linguistic 'limitations', as well as the use of, even 'heuristic', proper nouns such as 'Melanesia' and 'Euro-America'—all these suggest the presence of things, as I have defined them, in Strathernian thought. If Strathern tends to make 'Euro-America' as a thing in her analyses heuristic, while historicizing Euro-America as the thing from within which her analyses occur, Strathernians have attempted to desubstantialize the latter, so that it too takes a heuristic form. For them, unlike for Strathern, at least at certain key moments, the "we" of anthropological analysis "is not cultural, historical or geopolitical ... Rather, its significance is conceptual. The 'we' is the figure to which an anthropologist minded to reconceptualize an object of inquiry attaches the initial conceptual assumptions they are attempting critically to shift" (Holbraad 2020: 505) in the process of anthropological analysis. This difference between Strathern's tendency to understand her own project as extending but working within the limits of a certain linguistically and historically particular conceptual remit and some strands of Strathernian anthropology's more abstract conception of the analytical 'we' does not matter for the point I wish to make here: that all Strathernian anthropology is ultimately grounded in things, be they heuristic or historical, even if it puts emphasis on the relations within and between them.

Matei Candea (2017, 2018) has described the analytical implications of beginning with either a heuristic or a historical Euro-America in terms of 'frontal' and 'lateral' modes of comparison. Where 'frontal comparisons' concern what I, following Holbraad and Pedersen (2009, 2017), would call the 'extensive' limits of analytical familiarity, in which "an unfamiliar ethnographic entity [e.g., Melanesia] is contrasted to a putatively familiar background [e.g., Euro-America]" (Candea 2017: 90), 'lateral comparisons' compare apparently familiar cases (such as 'Melanesia' and 'Euro-America', now heuristic not historical things), "set side by side to highlight their similarities and differences" (ibid.: 93). In other words, these cases are set side by side to highlight the relations that might be drawn between them.

Strathern is not particularly concerned with the frontal comparison between Melanesia as an 'unfamiliar entity' and 'Melanesia' (or 'Euro-America', for that matter) as the putatively familiar analytical background of anthropological discourse. Rather, she is interested most often in setting up comparisons between two apparently familiar 'cases' to make 'visible' unfamiliar relations between them (Strathern 1991). Nonetheless, the 'limits' in which these comparisons occur, I want to point out, are the contours of the really real historical thing

that Strathern traces back to seventeenth-century Britain. Using a set of now established techniques, such as the echo, bifurcation, the duplex, cutting, and elicitation (see Street and Copeland 2014), Strathern traces unfamiliar relations within the apparently already known limits of the English language and within Euro-American conceptual repertoires. Thereby, the frontal relation, between Euro-America and Melanesia, is elided for the sake of lateral relations between ‘Euro-America’ and ‘Melanesia’ within Euro-America. The quotation marks around ‘Melanesia’, ‘Euro-America’, and other proper nouns are a way of reducing them, in contrast to Dumontian things, to merely heuristic things. Focusing upon the lateral over the frontal relations of anthropology likewise shifts the focus from the encounter of a familiar thing (Euro-America) with an unfamiliar one (e.g., Melanesia) to the internal relations within the former.

To put this in slightly more concrete imagery, it may be helpful to recount Janet Carsten’s (2014) interview with Strathern in terms of her gardening techniques, which are used as illustrative of her anthropological approach. Most notably, Strathern says that she tends not to dig or to buy new plants or seeds but to focus mostly on cutting (*ibid.*). ‘Cutting’, as noted, is a key method of Strathernian comparison (Strathern 1996b; see also Copeland and Street 2014). The ‘material’ between two ‘cases’, for example, a ‘Melanesian’ kinship practice and a discussion of ‘Euro-American’ reproductive technologies (Strathern 1995), is cut away in such a precise and unique way as to reveal surprising similarities and differences, that is, relations that had never been thought of before. We may note here, however, that the work of frontal comparison—buying seeds and plants from beyond or digging beneath the ground—has already been done in previous acts of frontal comparison (translation), whether by Strathern (1972) or by others. In this analogy, Strathern’s garden is Euro-America as a historical thing, but she elides the (‘frontal’) relations between this familiar thing and the unfamiliar world beyond it (including Melanesia) by avoiding digging beneath the garden or buying seeds from outside it. She rather focuses on cutting out relations between the elements of her garden (the ‘cases’ of lateral comparison) that are already there. She is not only focusing on the relations between the (heuristic) things in her garden rather than on those things themselves, but she is also eliding the (historical) thingliness of the garden itself by remaining inside it. Nonetheless, both kinds of thing are there and are necessary for her gardening to take place.

Strathern’s relation to her garden is (laterally) comparable to Lily’s relation with the wall. For both Strathern and Lily, the thinghood neither of the encompassing wall or garden nor of the things within the wall or garden is their chief concern. As with Strathern and the world surrounding her garden, Lily is not focused (as are the church’s Euro-American critics) upon the external relations between ‘the church’ and other Christian groups. Such relations imply denominationalism, the worst sin of Christianity, according to Nee. Both Lily

and Strathern are concerned with the relations between the 'things' (church members, plants, stones, cases) that are internal to the encompassing thing (the church, Euro-America), much more than they are with the things themselves. The difference is that while Strathern is concerned with drawing out these relations into a dazzling anthropological analysis (or indeed, presumably a dazzling section of her garden), Lily is concerned with her own relational becoming as a living, growing stone in the wall of God. In contrast to Lily, and by inference CEA, EAC is interested precisely in the thinghood of things internal to Christianity—is this thing really Christian or not?—and the thinghood of Christianity in its external relation to God—are Christians relating to this external thing God correctly or not? While Lily and the CEA relate through lateral comparison, EAC relates through frontal comparison.

Here we are relating relations (Strathern's with anthropology, Lily's with 'the church', EAC's with God) rather than constructing things, as with Dumont. The point of our Strathernian analysis is to draw out (hopefully) interesting relations between Lily and Strathern, CEA and EAC. The significance of the analysis is not in constructing interesting things (like Dumont's categories of individualism and holism), but in making interesting relations. Nonetheless, things (Strathern, Lily, CEA, EAC) are still prerequisite in some way for these relations to be related. Strathern suggests that it is possible to have relations without *relata* (cf. Barad 2007), drawing most recently upon John Locke's example of the father-son relation (Strathern 2020: 84). Locke argues that, without knowing either the son or the father in question, we can have an idea of how they are related through our prior familiarity with what the father-son relation entails. This is a convincing instance of a relation preceding the things it relates in some way, but it far from shows that an anthropological analysis without things of some kind is possible. In fact, Strathernian analyses seem each to depend upon things in some way. Despite this, Strathern and her interpreters have put the accent of indispensability on relations over things.

Using two select analytical examples, I hope to have shown that anthropological analysis, even of the most relational kind, has so far been impossible without things as much as it has without relations. Now I aim to show that this is because both thing-focused and relation-focused anthropological analysis has assumed a both/and approach to the role of things and relations. Taking an either/or approach reveals that it is things rather than relations that anthropology has not yet moved beyond.

Third Analytical Approach: Things in Either/Or Perspective

In both the Dumontian and Strathernian approaches described, whether we see things or relations is a matter of emphasis on some parts of the analytical picture rather than others. We might describe Euro-American individualism as a thing

(be it ideological or sociological), or we might climb inside this thing and focus on the social or ideation relations that compose or are extractable from it. But whether we emphasize the relational or thingly aspects of analysis, the occluded concept (things and relations respectively here) will still be present in some form, because things and relations in both Dumontian and Strathernian analyses are mutually defined. There are always both relations and things in these approaches. From life in *taiwan zhaohui*, I argue, we can derive an alternative mode of analysis, one that differs from both the relation-dependent thing focus of Dumont and the thing-dependent relational focus of Strathern. In order for the differences between these analytics to become clear, however, we must first sharpen our definition of the thing.

In both the Dumontian and Strathernian approaches discussed above, the thing was defined as that which in some way is the same as, and is one with, itself. To further refine this definition, I enlist here the help of object-oriented ontology (OOO), which is part of a wider philosophical development that calls itself ‘speculative realism’ (Bryant et al. 2011). Speculative realism, like so-called naïve realism, holds that the really real exists and is describable, but that it can only ever be partially accessed (for humans and non-humans alike), so that descriptions of it are inescapably speculative. Consistent with these premises, OOO posits the non-reducible existence of ‘objects’ at all scales, from the microscopic to the hand-held to the institutional. The degree to which an object is an object is the degree to which it cannot be reduced to either that which it composes or that which it affects (Garcia 2014). According to Graham Harman (2016), who coined the term ‘object-oriented ontology’, natural science and social science are guilty respectively of these two forms of reduction, which he terms ‘undermining’ and ‘overmining’, and have therefore never yet taken objects seriously. It is with the thin ‘ontological’ band between these two object-reducing perspectives that OOO concerns itself. The vocabulary OOO uses to articulate the nature of this band is especially useful for translating into explicitly analytical language the largely implicit approach to ‘oneness’ taken in *taiwan zhaohui*.

Switching back from the term ‘object’ to its equivalent, ‘thing’, the implications for understanding a thing as that which is reducible to neither its components nor its effects are far-reaching (nor does it contradict our earlier definition). There are two relevant conclusions we can draw here. The first is that whether a thing is indeed a thing in this way seems beyond the pale of confirmation. We only ever know of a thing’s existence through its effects upon us. We only ever seem to know what a thing is by looking at what it is made of, or what it can do. Thus, in order to ‘see’ everything using this definition of the thing, we must, with the speculative realists, take a speculative leap into this thing-focused universe. We must just accept that things are things to the degree that they are irreducible to their components or effects, and then see where this takes us.

The second conclusion follows on from this one. It is that no thing is describable, as a thing, in terms of its relations with any other thing. We must leave relations behind entirely. Consider that if we are really interested in a wristwatch as a thing in this sense, we cannot describe it in terms of either its effects (telling the time) or its components (hands, batteries, strap). Rather, and this will seem an incredible leap for some, we must see these internal relations (between parts) and external relations (between wholes) as appearances of the thing itself. We must shift from the terminology of things and their 'relations' to something like the 'essences' and the 'appearances' of things, as do object-oriented ontologists in their descriptions of objects. Rather than reduce each thing to the world, we reduce the world to each thing. This is why OOO refers to the 'allure' and the 'infinite depths' of the object: from an object-oriented perspective, each object (thing) in turn becomes the 'essence' of all the 'appearances' that surround it. If this strange analytical frame has not already sent the reader packing, I suggest that its usefulness will become clearer if we observe it in ethnographic action.

Having partly grown up in 'the church' myself, it was the differences between the Taiwanese church context and the context of 'the church' in the UK, Europe, and the US that were most surprising when conducting fieldwork. In Taiwan, there was a lack of emphasis on self-transformation and so a lack of emphasis on the part-whole relations between 'the church' and the individual self. Instead of being concerned with a sincere⁵ transformation of the self through gradual incorporation into the collective, the question was rather one of attunement, either to the individual components of 'the church' or to 'the church' as a thing in itself.

For instance, I was often surprised by the relaxedness of those around me after hearing a live or recorded 'message', or after reading a text, which implored those listening and reading, in so many words, to "act now, with conviction and urgency" (we must "deny ourselves," "deny our culture," "eat Christ," become "one Body," etc.). While the message was playing or while the text was being read, the room was full of enthusiastic "Amens" and other heartfelt affirmations of the words being received. Milling around in the breaks between these messages, or chatting to church members after a reading session, I expected at first that the mood and content of these sessions would spill over into the breaks, no doubt due to my experiences with the CEA. More often, however, as soon as the video was paused, the speaker stopped speaking, or we finished a text, the room would quickly be filled with the sounds of laughter, back slapping, and greetings, followed by the rush to the table of food and refreshments that most often accompanied these meetings.

Importantly, the ability to shift between the collective, serious, spiritual self and the free and easy individual self was explicitly valued. In Jingmei, the neighborhood of Old Taipei with the highest concentration of church members in the world, in which I lived and spent most of my time conducting

fieldwork, before and after church meetings endless joking took place. “Fuck you!” brother Jin exclaimed with a huge grin at my host sister during my first church gathering. “You’re ugly!” he continued, showing off his English. Making sex, fat, and bald jokes were common currency in Jingmei. Outside church meetings, older church brothers teased one another about who was the richest and joked about the fact that social inferiors called them “brother” in church meetings. On our social media, ministry excerpts, meeting arrangements, and little prayers were interspersed with funny, lurid memes to general amusement. There seemed to be a near-deliberate attenuation of the contrast between the seriousness of church language and habitus and the silliness of the sociality that preceded and surrounded it. One repeated church joke punned on the similarity between (male and female) breasts and the shapes of steamed buns and folded dumplings. “Many people did not like brother Lee because they thought he was too serious,” old brother Yu said to me as I helped him around the National Taiwan Museum. “In fact, he was very playful, not serious at all,” brother Yu continued, “like brother Yang [my host father]—he has this same playful characteristic.” Comparing brother Yang to brother Lee was intended, I inferred, as a high compliment. Brother Yu saw their playfulness, their ability to shift between perspectives, as a sign of great spiritual maturity.

I came to understand that, without sincerity and full of play, the events in which the rather serious-seeming words of the church ministry were uttered and received were not taken as information-gathering sessions to be acted upon, but as instances, particular textures and aspects, of *taiwan zhaohui*. The words of the ‘leading brothers’ during conferences and trainings, and of the texts of Nee and Lee, were not, it seemed to me, taken primarily as blue-prints or guides for how to live. For some, the serious bits of church meetings were often treated as a kind of bland, repetitive ritual core, which made the time spent before and after church meetings all the more flavorsome and fun. While many elders (*zhanglao*) were very concerned to attune those under their care to *taiwan zhaohui* as the core focus of their attention, for many of these members *taiwan zhaohui* was merely the pretext for more exciting encounters. This was, I want to suggest, a peaceful battle between the existence of *taiwan zhaohui* as the thing whose essence was behind all appearances and as the concatenated appearances of many other things.

Sitting in his Taipei office on the thirteenth floor of the church-owned Believe Christ Building (*xin ji dalou*), which sits on the same road as Taipei 101, and thinking of my interview with Lily, I asked brother Deng, who some called “the president of the church,” whether he ever worries about being turned into a “Christ robot.” He laughed hard while looking at me with utter confusion. “No, I don’t,” he replied as his laughter subsided. I told him about Lily and suggested that maybe “losing one’s identity” was a “particularly Western concern.” The sentiment of his reply was, “Have you met church members? They’re as

different as different can be!" He was obviously right, and I started to feel silly even broaching the topic. He did offer me an image to think with, however. He said, "The glory of this star is different from the glory of that one, although we will all shine like a star." The way I interpret this is that the oneness (the thinghood) of *taiwan zhaohui* for brother Deng did not occur at a scale different from that of the individual as it did for Lily; rather, it was a certain shared quality of being, the shining 'star-ness' of stars in his image. Being one and being individual are different qualities of being and thus do not compete for the same 'space', as it were. There was little worry for brother Deng about the positive (Lily's image of perfection) or the negative (my assumption of non-sincerity) implications of non-isomorphy between oneness and individuality.

Let us imagine life in *taiwan zhaohui* to consist of a virtually infinite number of things, in the sense of our expanded definition above and so with the caveat that none of these things are related to one another as such. Until now, we may imagine the central Thing⁶ of *taiwan zhaohui*'s focus (itself) to be 'composed' of many, many other things: families, households, bodies, minds, friendships, fleeting emotional surges, memories, the whirring sound of an air conditioner even, the taste of a wafer, the cold water of baptism. We may imagine further that the composing of the 'larger' Thing from these 'smaller' things is in fact a series of relations: families travel to church meetings, bodies arrange themselves in particular patterns, minds imagine their bodies as part of a larger whole, individuals converse and coordinate themselves into a shared, mutual focus on their belongingness to *taiwan zhaohui*, whatever that is.⁷ But this does not work too well with life in *taiwan zhaohui* as described. Rather, it is as if, as I inferred, when church members are church members—the 'vessels' (*qi*) of the body of Christ—they are no longer their non-church selves. They flip 'digitally' (my term), playfully, non-sincerely from one existence to the other.

It fits better with these descriptions if we say that *taiwan zhaohui* and the things that, from a both/and perspective, 'compose' it exist incommensurably as either 'the church' or its 'components'. When each thing is, I want the reader to imagine, other things are not, or rather they are collapsed into aspects of the existence of this thing. From this perspective, we can understand that the concern of church elders and other 'responsible ones', as they are called, is not just social, with getting everyone together to sing, say, and do things correctly, but, dare I say it, ontological, with the very existence of 'the church'. Those whose ultimate concern is *taiwan zhaohui* as a oneness, a thing unto itself, pay much attention to these passing and more substantial potential unities (things) and their status as either appearances of 'the church' (desired), or not, which would thus constitute *taiwan zhaohui* as an appearance of them (undesired). They attend to the role of these unities as either things-in-themselves or as media of the church world. The very existence of 'the church' as a thing or as merely an aspect of the appearance of other things is at stake.

As suggested, I propose that we understand each thing to be composed of both essence (the thing as it is) and appearance (the thing as it is to other things, including itself). The essence of a thing is completely inaccessible, and yet it is also the condition of possibility for the continued existence of said thing. If the essence of a thing is collapsed into its appearance (for another thing, and for itself) that thing ceases to exist (as a ‘thing’). We can see the logic of this essentialist understanding of things if we return to *taiwan zhaohui*. Each ‘relation’, from another perspective, among ‘the brothers and sisters’ (*dixiong zimei*) when they are oriented to the existence of *taiwan zhaohui*, from a thing-focused perspective, is rather an ‘appearance’ of *taiwan zhaohui*. If *taiwan zhaohui* were not to retain an essence beyond its appearances, each brotherly, sisterly appearance would of course *be taiwan zhaohui*, which would not then exist as a singular thing beyond that instance.

The experimental analytic that *taiwan zhaohui* encourages us to try is one in which, paradoxically, field sites are decomposable to so many incommensurable components (things), which, when attuned to, collapse all others into aspects of themselves. From a god’s-eye view, on the right-hand side of figure 1, these components are ‘wholes’ as much as they are ‘parts’, because ultimately none are reducible to the parts they play in the lives of other things. *Taiwan zhaohui* exists in the form of many families, texts, bodies, and lives, and in the long run each of these things has a polyvalent existence of its own (*à la* Latour 1988; Miller 2013). Nonetheless, in any particular moment, each would-be-thing becomes often merely an aspect, an appearance of another thing. From this thing-focused, either/or perspective, we must describe what each component of this field site at each moment is: an aspect of *taiwan zhaohui* or of another thing, or a thing in its own right. They are never a bit of each (fig. 1).

The elders of *taiwan zhaohui* work hard to attune other church members to ‘the church’ as the Thing of which they are the appearance. Often, however, as noted above, members are more attuned in church contexts to the other things of which they are an appearance. We may call this a battle of different ‘realms’, as church elders do themselves (Zimmerman-Liu 2014). For example, while church members are an appearance of their marriage, they are not an appearance of *taiwan zhaohui*; the existence of these two things (as things) is incommensurable. From this perspective, we can say that the respective difference between CEA and EAC, although this is how neither would articulate it, is one of ‘the church’ as Thing versus Christianity as individual things (denominations). From the latter perspective, the difference between the church and other groups is one of ‘mere cultural difference’, as the world is composed of many such things (Christian groups). From the former perspective, it is a question of the whole *raison d’être* of humanity and of God—to be a single, human-divine Thing. While church members are defined according to the church as Thing,

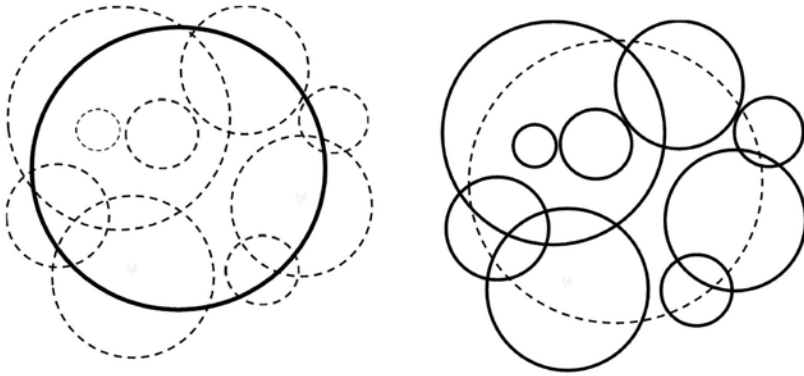


FIGURE 1: 'the church' as thing (left) and as a site of other things (right). The left-hand figure represents the thingly existence of 'the church' and the non-existence of families, minds, books, melodies, which are subsumed 'within' this thing when it is the focus of an either/or perspective. The right-hand figure represents the opposite: the collapse of the thing and the coming into being of the things that were subsumed within it, which in turn become things themselves.

neither the Church nor 'the church' is the defining thing of Euro-American Christian focus; instead, each individual, or at least each congregation, is a thing unto itself.

Conclusion: Relations without Things?

Three of four options in a grid of possibilities concerning the role of things and relations in anthropological analysis have been explored. Out of a concern to contribute to and extend a long-standing question of anthropological analysis, I suggest that another possibility would be to explore an either/or relational analysis without things. Although Strathern and Strathernians especially have gone some way toward eliminating things from their analyses, I claim that such elimination will remain impossible unless the either/or perspective is considered.⁸ It is with the help of such a perspective that I challenge relational thinkers to frame an analytical approach that is absent of things. To conclude, I respond to a question that I imagine might impede that challenge from being taken up, namely, why describe in only one register, rather than combine both, or more, into a single description? There seem to me to be two potential answers to this question.

First, a one-dimensional analysis has theoretical reflexivity built into it. At least since the writing culture debate, anthropologists have been concerned

to do for anthropological analysis what René Magritte's famous painting did for pictures of pipes: to emphasize that representations are not the realities they represent. Often this is done by demonstrating reflexivity, by showing awareness of the ways in which the analytical perspective of the article or monograph in question has been shaped by the author or the research method. These demonstrations of reflexivity, however, are only externally related to the subsequent analysis. If that section of the text is missed, then the analysis could well be read as an unreflexive account of reality. One-dimensional analyses in terms of either things or relations, in contrast, are analogous to imaging a single phenomenon using two different wavelengths of light respectively.

Researchers in spectral imaging are accustomed to the notion that getting a full picture of a phenomenon requires imaging it in distinct wavelength regions—such as radio, UV, X-ray, infrared, visible light—using specific tools that detect at those wavelengths. The distinct images identified at each wavelength by each tool may then be analyzed separately for the different elements and aspects of the phenomenon they reveal. Here, the dividing up of a phenomenon into distinct frames is not something to be reflexively accounted for. Rather, the existing phenomenon is too composite, too layered and mixed up to be perceived for what it is. In order to identify the phenomenon, it needs to be spliced up into distinct wavelength frames. Likewise, an either/or analysis has built into it the idea that analysis is about splicing up reality into distinct frames so that it can be seen for what it is. Given that this splicing up is what either/or analysis is supposed to do, the partiality of such splicing is not something to be apologized for in advance.

The second answer leads on from the first. Here again, the singularity of an either/or perspective is its virtue. However, rather than saying that reality should be spliced up in order to be understood, we might say that reality itself is spliced, that phenomena themselves exist in an either/or—rather than a both/and—state. From this perspective, we might reframe the either/or approach as a 'parallax view'. Explaining this notion, Slavoj Žižek (2009: 4) writes of:

the illusion ... of putting two incompatible phenomena on the same level ... [that is] ... the illusion of being able to use the same language for phenomena which are mutually untranslatable and can be grasped only in a kind of parallax view, constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. Thus there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space—although they are closely connected, even identical in a way, they are, as it were, on the opposed sides of a Moebius strip ... they are *two* sides of the same phenomenon which, precisely as two sides, can never meet.

The third mode of analysis in this article is intended to be an example of what half of a parallax, either/or anthropological approach to the question of things

and relations might look like. My intention, however, is not only to champion a thing-oriented anthropology, but to propose filling in the other side of this incommensurable either/or approach to relations and things. This either/or approach might then form another half, alongside the both/and approach, of a doubly parallaxic meta-approach to things and relations in anthropology.

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Notes

1. As will be seen, the either/or focus on things is derived directly from the approach to 'oneness' in 'the church in Taiwan'. However, I also utilize the vocabulary of object-oriented ontology (OOO) to help me articulate this focus. I understand the role of OOO here as analogous to the way in which the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze or Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for example, have been used in recent accounts of animism.
2. The verse reads: "Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened *bread* of sincerity and truth" (KJV).
3. Just to let the reader know, I am now, happily, an 'atheist anthropologist' (Blanes 2006).
4. Dumont has of course been critiqued, principally on the holistic side, for, using the definition of things given above, the thingliness of his analysis. The idea that Indian holism especially is selfsame and one with itself to the degree that

Dumont claims has been repeatedly called into question (Barnett et al. 1976). We could critique a Dumontian analysis of the difference between CEA and EAC along the same lines. The idea that Euro-American Christianity is homogeneously individualist would surely be challenged, and indeed it has been (e.g., Mosko 2010) by many anthropologists of Christian communities in both Europe and North America. Conversely, not all members of the church in Europe or North America are as holistic in their understanding as Lily. Nonetheless, useful questions might still be asked, at least on the holism side of my proposed Dumontian analysis, by resting our conclusions upon the recognition of two distinct things: EAC's individualism and CEA's holism. Questions arise, such as, How is it that CEA has retained an apparent degree of holism that Dumont resigned to history? Is the holistic influence here Chinese? Or has holism never left Christianity in the way that Dumont and others (e.g., Troeltsch [1912] 1992; Weber [1930] 2013) have suggested? It is true also that Dumont's Christian individualism as a conceptual thing has been highly productive in certain areas of anthropology (e.g., Robbins 2015). Thus, we could say that our analysis of these two conceptual things is potentially productive and useful.

5. Here, sincerity is used in the sense of isomorphy between one's thoughts and actions (Haeri 2017; Keane 2002; Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017).
6. Here I capitalize the central 'Thing' of ethnographic focus.
7. We may prefer to occlude thingliness altogether, as much of anthropology does, and describe *taiwan zhaohui* as merely the 'context' in which relations occur, but that would be to abandon the argument.
8. "We never wanted to eliminate things!" some Strathernians might protest. "The point is the interestingness of relations not the evilness of things." I hope I have shown that things can be analytically interesting too. But whether or not the implicit or explicit, primary or secondary elimination of analytical things is the—or an—aim of Strathernian analysis, below I try to convince the reader, Strathernian or not, that it should be.

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