

## Comments on Xu's Article

Zhemeng Xu's article, *Between Scriptural Language and Devotional Translation: Chinese Rosary Manuals in Seventeenth-Century China*, offers a careful contribution to the study of early Sino-Christian translation and devotional practice. From my perspective as a practical theologian who works with narratives of lived faith and religion, I find Xu's approach methodologically compelling because it shifts attention from official texts to everyday religious practices. Drawing on one Portuguese Rosary guide and three seventeenth-century Chinese Rosary manuals (1616, 1628, and c. 1665), Xu argues that devotional and instructional religious literature, such as Prayer books, Sunday readings, and catechetical materials, functioned as primary sites of scriptural transmission when full Bible translation was absent. Her central thesis is that these materials should be understood as genuine forms of biblical translation because they mediated biblical language through ritual use, repetition, and instruction. As she notes in the abstract, these manuals were "not biblical translations in the strict sense," yet they "incorporated biblical narratives and formulae in ways that confronted many of the same linguistic, conceptual, and doctrinal challenges faced by Bible translation" (Xu 2026, 1). By redirecting attention from canonical Scripture to devotional manuals, Xu broadens the category of biblical translation and provides a more practice-oriented account of how Christian knowledge was formed and sustained.

A significant strength of the article lies in its conceptual claim that devotional literature constitutes a "distinctive mode of scriptural mediation" (p. 1). Xu argues that Rosary manuals "do more than reproduce scripture: they frame, structure, and interpret these scriptural passages, telling believers when, how, and what to pray" (pp. 8–9). This insight shows that these texts do not simply repeat biblical material but actively shape how it is understood and embodied. Through close comparison of the Portuguese source text with the Chinese translations, Xu demonstrates how biblical scenes were organized into patterns of recitation and meditation that guided the new Chinese converts' imagination. Scripture, therefore, was encountered not only through reading but through practices. From a practical-theological

perspective attentive to narrative formation, this analysis is constructive because it shows how Christian identity is shaped through repeated participation in structured stories rather than through doctrinal instruction alone.

The article is also historically grounded. Xu situates these devotional translations within the institutional and pastoral realities of seventeenth-century Catholic missions. She explains that “prayer-based biblical translation was therefore not incidental, but a historically conditioned strategy shaped both by Catholic Church policy in Europe and by the pastoral needs of a rapidly growing Christian community in China” (p. 6). Although concerns might arise regarding colonial attitudes due to restrictions on vernacular Bibles, Xu suggests that the scarcity of clergy and uneven literacy levels made prayer manuals practical tools for catechesis. Consequently, instead of presenting the absence of a complete Bible translation as a deficiency, Xu shows how missionaries creatively adopted alternative strategies that proved effective in everyday life. The Rosary manuals served as portable catechisms through which scriptural language was memorized and internalized in context rather than abstract ideals.

Xu further enriches the discussion by attending to the social actors who sustained these devotional practices. She challenges literati-centered histories by highlighting women as key transmitters of faith. Women’s engagement, she observes, “did not lie in producing a translated text ... but in ‘practicing’ a translated text as a ritual” (p. 6). Even “despite widespread illiteracy that inhibited female converts from reading prayer texts, they still managed to learn them, mostly through oral transmission” (p. 8). This shift in focus from authorship to practice is one of the article’s most significant methodological contributions, reframing translation not merely as a textual or linguistic act but as an embodied, lived process encompassing memorization, recitation, and domestic performance. For scholars attentive to lived religion and narrative embodiment, such evidence demonstrates how theological meaning circulates through relationships and habits as much as through printed texts. Therefore, Xu’s analysis expands the scope

of translation studies beyond literary works and enables an exploration of everyday religious experiences.

Finally, Xu's detailed textual comparisons show that translation involved ongoing theological and cultural negotiation. She demonstrates that the Chinese versions, in contrast to the Portuguese, "often expand upon the Gospel scenes," adding explanation for clarity, while "all the notes that precede the offering of each mystery and identify the Gospel sources ... were also left out" (pp. 19–20). These decisions suggest that intelligibility and pastoral usefulness were prioritized over strict formal correspondence. At the same time, later editions show "a growing orientation toward literati's intellectual framework and aesthetics," which "may have created a gap between literary ambitions and the major devotional audiences" (p. 1). Such tensions reveal how devotional texts continually adapt to different readers and contexts. Although having more direct evidence of reception could have strengthened the study, Xu's detailed textual and historical analysis remains compelling throughout. Overall, the article offers a meaningful scholarly contribution by showing that devotional manuals were not just marginal supplements but key media for translating, interpreting, and living Scripture. For practical theology and narrative approaches to religion, Xu's work serves as both a historical case study and a useful methodological example for exploring how faith manifests in practice, not just in doctrine.

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