

A Comparative Study of Thai and Chinese Terms Referring to Jesus in Contemporary Bible Versions

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Abstract

This exploratory study compared how terms and expressions referring to Jesus are represented in the Thai New Contemporary Version (TNCV; International Bible Society, 2001) and the Chinese Contemporary Bible (CCB; Biblica, Inc., 2011). The study does not assume that the CCB was translated from the TNCV; rather, it conducts a parallel comparison of two modern translations. The corpus comprised the four canonical Gospels, totaling 89 chapters. Seventeen names, titles, kinship expressions, and role-denoting terms were selected purposively because they (a) referred directly to Jesus, (b) recurred or carried substantial theological significance, and (c) yielded an identifiable Thai–Chinese correspondence in the same verse or discourse unit. Analysis operated at two levels: lexical comparison of the term pair and verse-level interpretation of its narrative and theological function. Five strategies adapted from Newmark were used as heuristic categories: literal translation, free translation, addition, transference or transliteration, and cultural substitution. Descriptive counts showed seven

literal items (41.18%), four cultural substitutions (23.53%), three transliterations (17.65%), two additions (11.76%), and one free translation (5.88%). Because the sample contains only 17 distinct types, the percentages summarize this bounded exploratory dataset and are not inferential statistics or token frequencies. The analysis distinguishes historical word formation from synchronic textual function: 基督, for example, has a transliterational history but functions in the selected contemporary versions as the conventional counterpart of พระคริสต์, whereas 道 is interpreted through both its Chinese conceptual history and its function in the context of John 1. The findings indicate that no single strategy guarantees theological adequacy; adequacy depends on terminological continuity, verse-level context, intertextual relations, and reader knowledge. The study offers a replicable framework for larger corpus-based and reception-oriented comparisons of Thai and Chinese Bible translations.

Keywords: Bible translation, Jesus, parallel translation comparison, Thai-Chinese translation, religious terminology

Introduction

Translation enables communication across linguistic, cultural, and religious boundaries, but the translation of sacred texts also participates in the formation and transmission of communal doctrine and terminology. Nida (1964) and Nida and Taber (1969), whose models emerged substantially from Bible-translation practice, argue that translation must account for both linguistic form and receptor response. Later scholarship likewise treats Bible translation as a historically situated interpretive act rather than a neutral replacement of words (Naudé, 2005; Zetzsche, 1999). A lexical choice may

consequently influence how readers understand a person, a relationship, or a theological claim.

Thai and Chinese differ in writing systems, lexical formation, syntactic preferences, honorific resources, and histories of contact with Christianity. Thai religious expressions frequently contain honorific elements and explanatory compounds, whereas written Chinese often packages meaning into compact lexical units. Chinese Bible terminology is also the product of several centuries of missionary, literary, and theological negotiation rather than a single act of lexical substitution (Eber et al., 1999; Zetzsche, 1999). A comparison of modern Thai and Chinese versions must therefore consider conventional usage, historical formation, and verse-level function.

Terms referring to Jesus are especially significant because they do not merely identify a historical person. “Christ,” “Messiah,” “Son of God,” “Son of Man,” “Savior of the world,” “Lord,” and “Lamb of God” encode roles, scriptural allusions, and theological propositions. Bible-translation scholarship has repeatedly noted the tension between formal continuity, contextual meaning, and receptor accessibility (Nida & Taber, 1969; de Waard & Nida, 1986). A formally close translation can preserve lexical structure but remain opaque to readers without Christian background; an explanatory rendering can improve accessibility while introducing an interpretation that is less explicit in the verse.

The selected contemporary versions aim broadly at accessible modern-language expression, but they achieve accessibility through language-specific resources. Chinese Christian terminology contains transliterated forms such as 耶稣 and 弥赛亚, semantically transparent

compounds such as 上帝的儿子, and culturally resonant terms such as 道. Studies of the Chinese Bible show that such choices are embedded in debates over naming, cultural accommodation, and the relation between Chinese concepts and biblical discourse (Eber et al., 1999; Zetzsche, 1999). This coexistence makes the Gospel corpus a useful site for examining how lexical form and theological function interact.

Earlier translation scholarship distinguishes between source-oriented and target-oriented methods and between literal and free translation (Newmark, 1988; Saibua, 2010). Studies of religious and cultural terminology likewise show that translators may combine accepted equivalents, explanation, loan forms, and cultural approximation according to context (Athitthanukun, 2018; Konthong, 2023). Research on Chinese Bible translation further indicates that translators do not adhere to a single invariant form; lexical choices and structural adjustments respond to genre, context, and historically established translation norms (Eber et al., 1999; Zetzsche, 1999).

Despite this growing literature, focused comparison of Thai expressions referring to Jesus and their Chinese counterparts remains limited. Existing studies more commonly examine English–Thai Christian vocabulary, Chinese Christian terminology, or culture-specific words in literary texts. A Thai–Chinese comparison can reveal how two Asian-language contemporary versions mediate Christian terminology and how culturally established Chinese forms correspond to Thai honorific and descriptive expressions.

Accordingly, this study analyzes names, titles, and descriptions referring directly to Jesus in the four Gospels. It compares the TNCV and CCB

as parallel target texts and does not claim a historical source-to-relay relationship between the two versions. Indirect translation research emphasizes that a relay claim concerns translation genealogy and must be supported by evidence about mediating texts (Ringmar, 2007; Rosa et al., 2017; Washbourne, 2013). The direction “Thai–Chinese” in this article therefore describes the researchers’ comparative procedure, not the production history of the CCB.

Research Objectives

The objective was to explore how terms and expressions referring to Jesus correspond across the TNCV and CCB at lexical and verse levels by applying five translation-strategy categories as descriptive heuristics.

Research Scope

The study was delimited to the four canonical Gospels. The parallel target texts were the Thai New Contemporary Version (TNCV) and the Chinese Contemporary Bible (CCB), comprising 89 chapters: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 21. Names, titles, kinship expressions, role labels, and metaphorical designations directly referring to Jesus were included. General references to God, disciples, prophets, or other persons were excluded unless they formed part of an expression identifying Jesus.

The analytic unit was a distinct Thai–Chinese term pair, not every occurrence token. A candidate was retained when it (1) referred directly to Jesus; (2) functioned as a name, title, kinship expression, role designation, or salient theological metaphor; (3) occurred in corresponding verse or discourse contexts in both versions; and (4) was either recurrent or

theologically salient within the Gospels. Variant surface forms that realized the same relation were grouped, whereas forms that changed the identifying information or dominant translation operation were separated. These criteria produced 17 types. The sample is therefore purposive and exploratory. Percentages describe only the distribution of these 17 types and are neither inferential statistics nor occurrence frequencies.

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Newmark's (1988) model distinguishes methods oriented toward the source text from those oriented toward the target reader and identifies procedures such as literal translation, transference, cultural equivalence, and explanatory adjustment. Nida and Taber (1969) and de Waard and Nida (1986) similarly emphasize that biblical meaning must be examined within linguistic and communicative context. Empirical studies have applied comparable categories to Christian vocabulary (Athitthanukun, 2018; Konthong, 2023), culture-specific translation (Baker, 2018), and the choice between phonetic and semantic translation in Chinese terminology (Zhu, 2020). The present study operationalized five categories observable in the bounded Thai–Chinese corpus: literal translation, free translation, addition, transference or transliteration, and cultural substitution.

Literal translation was coded when the Thai and Chinese forms preserved the principal semantic components and grammatical relation without substantial explication. Free translation was coded when the proposition or discourse function was retained through a noticeably restructured expression. Addition required an overt Chinese identifying or explanatory component absent from the paired Thai form in the selected

verse. Transference or transliteration was assigned when phonological continuity, rather than lexical meaning, motivated the conventional Chinese form. Cultural substitution was assigned when an established Chinese word supplied a culturally available conceptual entry point for the Thai religious expression. These definitions draw on Newmark (1988), Baker (2018), and studies of phonetic and semantic naming in Chinese translation (Zhu, 2020). The categories are heuristic rather than ontologically exclusive. Following descriptive translation studies, classification focuses on the function of the form in the observed target texts while retaining evidence about its history and context (Toury, 2012). Thus, a term may receive two descriptions at different analytic levels. 基督 is historically a phonographic formation associated with the transmission of “Christ,” but synchronically it functions as the conventional Chinese counterpart of พระคริสต์. 道 is an established Chinese Christian term in John 1 while simultaneously activating Chinese philosophical associations. The results report the dominant synchronic operation, and the interpretation records historical or cultural complexity separately.

The framework assumes that strategy choice is shaped by three interacting factors. First, linguistic form determines whether an expression can be compositionally mapped into Chinese. Second, theological function determines how much doctrinal precision or intertextual continuity is required. Third, target-cultural accessibility determines whether an established Chinese term, an explanatory element, or a phonological form will be comprehensible and acceptable. The observed Chinese rendering is the outcome of these interacting constraints.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework for the comparative analysis

Input	Analytic process	Output
Thai TNCV terms and Gospel context	Pair with CCB form; examine lexical meaning, textual context, and theological role	Strategy classification
Chinese CCB terms and Chinese–Thai dictionary evidence	Compare source–target semantic components and cultural associations	Interpretive explanation
17 distinct term pairs	Count items in five categories and calculate percentages	Distribution and implications

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This research employed an exploratory qualitative documentary design with descriptive counts. Parallel-text comparison was conducted at two levels: (1) the lexical level, where corresponding Thai and Chinese forms were aligned, and (2) the verse or discourse level, where narrative role, speaker, addressee, and theological function were examined. Translation research commonly combines aligned textual data with contextual interpretation rather than treating isolated dictionary meanings as sufficient evidence (Baker, 2018; Toury, 2012). Counts were used only to summarize the bounded set of lexical types. No inferential claims, population estimates, or experimental claims about reader comprehension were made.

2. Sources of Data

Primary data were drawn from the TNCV and CCB. The four Gospels were selected because they contain a concentrated range of names and

titles referring to Jesus. A modern Chinese–Thai dictionary was used to check ordinary Chinese meanings, while historical and translation scholarship was used to avoid interpreting phonographic characters as if their individual dictionary meanings explained the Christian term (Eber et al., 1999; Zetzsche, 1999).

3. Research Instrument

The research instrument was a structured coding table developed by the researchers. Each record contained: (1) Gospel and verse; (2) Thai form; (3) Chinese form; (4) speaker and discourse context; (5) lexical-semantic relation; (6) theological or narrative function; (7) dominant strategy; (8) historical-formation note; and (9) justification and competing classification. Separating “dominant strategy” from “historical formation” was essential for contested items such as 基督. The table also required an explicit distinction between textual evidence and researcher interpretation.

4. Data Collection

Data collection proceeded in five stages. First, all 89 chapters were screened for Thai forms directly naming, titling, characterizing, or addressing Jesus. Second, each candidate was aligned with the corresponding CCB verse. Third, duplicate occurrences were consolidated only when form, referent, and dominant operation remained stable; changes in identifying information or strategy were retained separately. Fourth, each item was tested against the four inclusion criteria stated in the scope. Fifth, the coding table was completed through verse-level reading of both versions. The procedure yielded 17 distinct types. Because the dataset was not exhaustive at token level and no saturation claim was made, the study is explicitly presented as exploratory.

5. Data Analysis

Analysis first recorded observable textual facts: the aligned Thai and Chinese forms, added or omitted components, syntactic relation, and verse setting. The researchers then interpreted the likely translation operation and theological consequence. Where more than one label was plausible, the dominant synchronic function determined the reported category and the alternative was documented in the analytic note. Counts were calculated as $P = (f/n) \times 100$, where $n = 17$ lexical types. These percentages are descriptive labels for the sample and do not compensate for its small size. The principal evidence remains qualitative analysis of the aligned verse contexts.

The design does not establish a relay relationship. A relay or indirect translation claim would require historical evidence that one version was produced through a mediating translation (Ringmar, 2007; Rosa et al., 2017; Washbourne, 2013). Here, TNCV and CCB are treated as parallel modern translations. The design also does not establish how all Chinese readers interpret the terms, whether one strategy is universally superior, or how the same forms behave in other versions. Finally, the 17-type sample and single-research-team coding restrict generalizability and reliability; the study should be read as hypothesis-generating rather than conclusive.

Research Results

1. Overall Distribution of Translation Strategies

Textual observation showed 17 distinct Thai–Chinese correspondences meeting the inclusion criteria. Under the operational definitions, seven were coded as literal translation (41.18%), four as cultural substitution (23.53%), three as transference or transliteration (17.65%), two

as addition (11.76%), and one as free translation (5.88%). These are descriptive type counts. The interpretation that follows examines why a category was selected, which competing category was possible, and what each solution preserves or risks losing.

Table 2

Distribution of translation strategies (n = 17 term pairs)

Translation strategy	Number of terms	Percentage
Literal translation	7	41.18
Free translation	1	5.88
Addition	2	11.76
Transference / transliteration	3	17.65
Cultural substitution	4	23.53
Total	17	100.00

1.1 Literal Translation

Seven forms were categorized as literal translation at the synchronic correspondence level: 基督, 耶稣基督, 人子, 大卫的后裔, 儿子 or 子, 上帝的儿子, and 犹太人的王 or 犹太人之王. The observable fact is that the paired modern versions use conventional terms or constructions that preserve the identifying relation found in the verse. The interpretive claim is that these forms function as literal or conventional semantic counterparts in the selected corpus; this claim does not deny that some terms arose through earlier phonographic transmission.

The rendering 人子 is compositionally concise: 人 denotes “human/person” and 子 denotes “son.” In passages such as John 1:51 and Matthew 16:27, the expression functions not merely as a kinship phrase but

as a self-designation associated with human condition, authority, suffering, and eschatological glory. The Chinese form preserves the compact title and allows its theological meaning to accumulate through Gospel context rather than through added explanation.

The pair พระบุตรของพระเจ้า–上帝的儿子 similarly retains the relation between God and the Son. The Chinese possessive marker 的 explicitly links 上帝 and 儿子. This form is semantically transparent, yet its doctrinal interpretation cannot be reduced to biological kinship. The translation succeeds lexically because it preserves the relationship stated in the text; theological context is still necessary to prevent an overly physical interpretation.

大卫的后裔 renders the Thai “son/descendant of David” by making genealogical descent explicit through 后裔. The shift from the narrower everyday sense of “son” to “descendant” is compatible with the messianic claim that Jesus belongs to David’s lineage. It therefore preserves the intended referential relation more clearly than a mechanically literal kinship noun might do in Chinese. 犹太人的王 and 犹太人之王 likewise retain the royal title “King of the Jews,” using two conventional possessive constructions.

基督 requires a two-level classification. Historically, its Chinese formation belongs to the transmission history of the title “Christ” and cannot be explained by combining the ordinary meanings of 基 and 督. Chinese Bible history cautions against character-by-character theological etymologies for established phonographic religious terms (Eber et al., 1999; Zetzsche, 1999). Synchronically, however, 基督 is the conventional Chinese title paired with Thai พระคริสต์ in the selected verses; no new explanatory material is

added. It is therefore coded as a conventional literal equivalent for the present comparison, with “historical transliteration” recorded as a secondary descriptor. The limitation is that readers unfamiliar with Christian convention cannot recover the underlying sense “the anointed one” from 基督 alone.

1.2 Free Translation

The single free-translation item was 世人的救主 in John 4:42, corresponding to the Thai title “Savior of the world.” Textually, 世人 specifies the people of the world as beneficiaries, while 救主 profiles the saving Lord. The interpretation is that the Chinese construction foregrounds the universal human scope of salvation rather than reproducing the Thai structure mechanically. Its advantage is clarity; its limitation is that the Chinese expression places greater emphasis on human beneficiaries than the broader Thai expression “the world.”

The low proportion of free translation does not imply that communicative considerations are absent elsewhere. It indicates only that, among the 17 selected terms, few required a wholesale re-expression of the lexical pattern. Many other forms could use conventional Chinese equivalents or compositional constructions. Free translation becomes more necessary when a direct structure would sound unnatural or fail to express the intended scope.

1.3 Addition

Two items were categorized as addition: 拿撒勒人耶稣 (“Jesus the Nazarene/Jesus of Nazareth”) and 大卫的后裔耶稣 (“Jesus, descendant of David”). In these forms, the proper name 耶稣 is combined with a geographic or genealogical identifier. The added element makes reference more explicit

and activates a relevant narrative or theological association for the Chinese reader.

拿撒勒人耶稣 identifies Jesus through Nazareth. In contexts where the Thai passage presents the name or a shorter designation, the Chinese form provides an identifying phrase that distinguishes the referent and connects him with a known place. 大卫的后裔耶稣 similarly foregrounds Davidic descent. The addition does not merely lengthen the expression; it guides interpretation by specifying which aspect of Jesus' identity is salient in the immediate episode.

Addition is useful when the target text benefits from referential clarity, but it must remain controlled. An explanatory element can help readers understand a place, role, or scriptural allusion, yet it can also introduce an interpretive emphasis. The two cases in this corpus remain closely tied to information already supported by the Gospel narrative.

1.4 Transference or Transliteration

Three forms were classified as transference or transliteration: 耶稣 (Jesus), 弥赛亚 (Messiah), and 以马内利 (Immanuel). These terms primarily preserve the sound and identity of proper names or inherited religious words rather than translating their lexical content into ordinary Chinese. Once conventionalized, such forms operate as stable members of Chinese Christian vocabulary.

耶稣 is the standard Chinese name for Jesus and provides unambiguous personal reference throughout the Gospels. Its effectiveness depends on convention rather than on the independent meanings of the characters 耶 and 稣. Character-by-character semantic interpretation would therefore be misleading. 弥赛亚 similarly maintains the recognizable identity

of “Messiah”; in passages such as John 1:41, the text may also relate the term to 基督, enabling readers to connect the inherited name with an established title. 以马内利 preserves “Immanuel,” whose meaning—“God with us”—is supplied by scriptural context.

Transliteration protects historical and intertextual identity, particularly for proper names. Its principal limitation is opacity: readers cannot necessarily infer meaning from sound alone. The Gospel text, parallel title, footnote, or explanatory clause may therefore be necessary when the meaning of the name is relevant to the argument.

1.5 Cultural Substitution

Four items were classified as cultural substitution: 羔羊 (lamb), 道 (Word/Logos), 老师 (teacher/master), and 主 (Lord). Each employs an established Chinese word that is readily interpretable within Chinese linguistic culture while assuming a specialized Christian function in context. 羔羊 denotes a lamb and is used in the expression “Lamb of God.” In the Gospel context, the term evokes sacrifice, innocence, and salvation. Chinese readers can understand the animal image directly, but its full force depends on biblical sacrificial symbolism. The translation therefore links a familiar lexical image to a specifically Christian theological network.

道 is the most culturally layered example. The observable correspondence in John 1 is the Thai expression พระวาจา or its equivalent in the selected edition and the Chinese term 道. Historically and culturally, 道 carries associations of way, principle, order, and ultimate reality in Chinese traditions. The interpretation is that this established Chinese Bible term offers a conceptual entry point, but it is not a complete equivalence. The surrounding text attributes pre-existence, creation, relation to God, and

incarnation to 道. The strategy's advantage is conceptual resonance; its limitation is the possibility that readers import Daoist or classical meanings not licensed by the passage. The verse context, not the isolated character, must control interpretation.

老师 is an ordinary Chinese term for teacher. When disciples address Jesus in contexts where Thai uses a respectful teacher-title, 老师 makes the social relationship immediately accessible. It emphasizes instruction and discipleship without requiring a foreign religious label. 主, meaning lord, master, or sovereign, similarly draws on a familiar term of authority and possession. In Christian discourse it becomes a major title expressing reverence, divine authority, and allegiance.

Cultural substitution thus improves immediacy but carries interpretive risk. Familiar words may activate target-cultural associations that only partially overlap with the source concept. Successful use depends on repeated textual framing that progressively specifies the intended Christian meaning.

1.6 Summary of the Seventeen Terms

Table 3

Classification of the 17 Thai–Chinese term pairs

Thai referent or gloss	Chinese form	Dominant strategy
Christ	基督	Literal conventional equivalent
Jesus Christ	耶稣基督	Literal conventional equivalent
Son of Man	人子	Literal

Thai referent or gloss	Chinese form	Dominant strategy
Son/descendant of David	大卫的后裔	Literal
Son	儿子 / 子	Literal
Son of God	上帝的儿子	Literal
King of the Jews	犹太人的王 / 犹太人之王	Literal
Savior of the world	世人的救主	Free
Jesus of Nazareth	拿撒勒人耶稣	Addition
Jesus, Son of David	大卫的后裔耶稣	Addition
Jesus	耶稣	Transliteration
Messiah	弥赛亚	Transliteration
Immanuel	以马内利	Transliteration
Lamb	羔羊	Cultural substitution
Word	道	Cultural substitution
Teacher / Master	老师	Cultural substitution
Lord	主	Cultural substitution

Discussion of Results

The predominance of literal translation supports the view that sacred-text translation often prioritizes terminological stability and semantic traceability. Names and titles recur across passages and participate in doctrinal interpretation; consistent equivalents allow readers to recognize these links. Literal translation is particularly effective when Chinese can reproduce the relevant semantic relation through compact compounds or possessive constructions, as in 人子 and 上帝的儿子. The result is consistent with research showing frequent use of direct translation for religious or

culture-bound terms when a recognized equivalent is available (Athitthanukun, 2018; Konthong, 2023).

Nevertheless, the combined proportion of non-literal strategies was 58.82%. This finding demonstrates that formal correspondence alone cannot account for the corpus. Proper names require transliteration, culturally embedded concepts invite established Chinese vocabulary, and some contexts benefit from clarification or reformulation. Translation of religious terminology is therefore not a binary choice between fidelity and adaptation. It is a series of local decisions about which aspect of meaning—sound, reference, semantic composition, doctrinal relation, or reader accessibility—must be foregrounded.

Transliteration performs a crucial identity-preserving function. 耶稣, 弥赛亚, and 以马内利 connect the Chinese text to a translingual religious tradition. They resist domestication at the lexical level and signal that the referents belong to a particular historical-scriptural world. This observation accords with Zhu (2020) discussion of the complementary strengths of semantic and phonetic translation. A sound-based form is especially useful for proper names, but it often requires contextual support when the name itself bears a meaningful proposition.

The addition strategy illustrates explicitation. By combining 耶稣 with 拿撒勒人 or 大卫的后裔, the Chinese text identifies the referent and activates associations of locality or messianic lineage. Explicitation can reduce ambiguity and support readers who do not automatically connect a shorter name with its narrative significance. However, additions must be evaluated against the immediate verse and the broader textual tradition because added specificity can influence interpretation.

Cultural substitution reveals the deepest negotiation between textual fidelity and target-cultural meaning. 道 is an outstanding example because it is both economical and conceptually resonant. Its Chinese associations can make the Johannine opening intelligible in a culturally powerful way, but they can also encourage readings shaped by Daoist or classical philosophical discourse. The surrounding predicates—becoming flesh, dwelling among people, and manifesting grace and truth—are therefore essential in differentiating the Gospel’s use from other meanings of 道. Cultural accessibility is produced by the interaction of term and context, not by the isolated word alone.

The same principle applies to 老师, 主, and 羔羊. Each is understandable as ordinary Chinese, yet each acquires specialized force in the biblical discourse. 老师 marks a pedagogical relationship; 主 marks authority and devotion; 羔羊 links an ordinary animal image to sacrificial theology. These translations show that familiar target-language words can become technical religious vocabulary through repeated contextual use. Cultural substitution does not necessarily erase foreignness; rather, it creates a point of entry from which the text develops a new, specialized meaning.

The results also clarify the relationship between strategy and theology. A strategy does not by itself guarantee theological adequacy. Literal wording can still be misunderstood, transliteration can remain opaque, and cultural substitution can overactivate local associations. Adequacy arises from the term’s consistency, the verse-level context, intertextual relations, and readers’ background knowledge. Translators of sacred texts must therefore evaluate not only whether an equivalent is

linguistically acceptable but also how it participates in a larger system of titles and claims.

The findings partly support and partly refine Athitthanukun (2018). They support the claim that Christian terminology is shaped by established community convention: 基督 and 主 function effectively because they belong to a recognized Chinese Christian lexicon. The present study, however, shows that denominational comparison alone cannot explain terms such as 道, whose interpretive risk derives from wider Chinese conceptual history. In contrast with a purely equivalence-oriented account, the analysis therefore requires both ecclesial convention and target-cultural semantics.

The results agree with Konthong (2023) that accepted equivalents, literal translation, explanation, borrowing, and cultural approximation coexist in the translation of Christian vocabulary. The difference lies in direction and genre. Konthong examined English–Thai literary translation, where narrative mediation may permit broader paraphrase; the present Gospel comparison shows a stronger pressure toward terminological continuity. This difference helps explain why literal or conventional equivalents form the largest category here, although they do not constitute a majority of all 17 types.

The findings further demonstrate structural flexibility in Chinese Gospel translation. 大卫的后裔 and 世人的救主 show that Chinese may restructure grammatical relations to express lineage or the scope of salvation naturally. This flexibility also affects theological titles. Structural naturalness should nevertheless be evaluated against verse-level theological function because a clearer Chinese construction may place emphasis on one aspect

of a broader Thai expression; 世人, for example, foregrounds human beneficiaries within the meaning of “the world.”

The results also support Zhu (2020) regarding the complementary roles of phonetic and semantic translation. 耶稣, 弥赛亚, and 以马内利 preserve historical identity through sound, whereas 人子 and 上帝的儿子 make semantic relations visible. The present findings qualify any simple preference for one approach: transliteration is effective for stable proper names but opaque without explanation, while semantic translation is accessible but may activate unintended local associations. The contrast between 弥赛亚 and 道 illustrates why the choice must be term- and context-specific.

One methodological implication is that historical origin and synchronic function should be distinguished. 基督, for example, has a transliterational history, whereas the present comparison treats it as the conventional equivalent of พระคริสต์. Conversely, 耶稣 is clearly classified as transliteration because its primary function is to preserve a proper name through sound. Future studies could use a multi-layer coding scheme that records both historical formation and present translation function, thereby avoiding the pressure to reduce complex terms to one label.

A second implication concerns the unit of analysis. The present percentages are based on 17 distinct term pairs, not on all occurrences. Consequently, 41.18% means that seven of the selected lexical pairs were literal translations; it does not mean that 41.18% of every reference to Jesus in the four Gospels was translated literally. Token-level corpus analysis may produce a different distribution, especially because frequent items such as

耶穌 recur many times. Reporting the unit explicitly improves the interpretability and reproducibility of translation-strategy research.

The study is limited to one Thai version and one Chinese version, both contemporary translations. It does not compare denominational traditions, earlier Chinese Bible versions, regional Chinese varieties, or reader reception. Classification was interpretive and was not tested through inter-coder agreement. The findings should thus be read as a structured description of the selected corpus rather than a universal model of Thai–Chinese Bible translation. These limitations also point directly to productive extensions of the research.

Recommendations

The findings support four context-specific recommendations. First, use a stable conventional equivalent when a title recurs intertextually and the Chinese Christian form is established. Thus, 基督 should remain consistent for พระคริสต์, but glossaries or notes should explain “the anointed one” because the Chinese form does not disclose that meaning. Second, use transliteration for proper names whose historical identity is primary, as with 耶穌, 弥赛亚, and 以马内利; when the name’s meaning is exegetically relevant, pair it with an in-text explanation or note rather than replacing the name.

Third, use controlled addition only when the verse or immediate discourse licenses the identifying information. 拿撒勒人耶穌 is appropriate when geographic identification matters, and 大卫的后裔耶穌 is appropriate when Davidic lineage is foregrounded. Additions should not import a title absent from both the verse and its discourse context. Fourth, retain

culturally resonant forms such as 道, 主, 老师, and 羔羊 when they are established and contextually productive, but assess the risk of over-association. For 道 in John 1, surrounding predicates and explanatory notes should anchor the term in creation, incarnation, grace, and truth rather than leaving it to an unrestricted Daoist reading.

Future research should build a verse-aligned corpus containing multiple Thai and Chinese Bible versions. Researchers should record both type and token frequencies, examine variation across discourse contexts, and publish inclusion and coding rules. This design would test whether the present 17-type pattern remains stable when every occurrence and multiple translation traditions are included.

Reader-response research should compare terms with identifiable trade-offs. For example, comprehension and association tasks could test 基督 with and without an explanatory gloss, 弥赛亚 alongside 基督, and 道 against a more explicitly verbal rendering. Participants should be stratified by familiarity with Christianity and Chinese classical thought. Such a design would directly test the opacity and over-association risks identified in this study rather than assuming accessibility from textual form alone.

Finally, future studies should employ at least two coders, retain competing labels, and report an agreement coefficient before resolving disagreements. A two-layer code distinguishing historical formation from synchronic textual function should be mandatory for terms such as 基督 and 道. Historical claims about relay translation should be made only when paratexts, translators' statements, archives, or textual evidence identify a mediating version, in line with indirect-translation research (Ringmar, 2007; Rosa et al., 2017; Washbourne, 2013).

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