

From Proverbs to Moral Pedagogy: Ethical Learning in Southeast Asian Traditions

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Abstract. This study examines Southeast Asian proverbs as a regional corpus of moral pedagogy rather than as isolated ornamental sayings. Using a curated workbook containing 227 proverb records from Brunei/Malay, Cambodia/Khmer, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Vietnam, and one Indonesia/Malay entry, the study conducted data auditing, canonical theme normalization, descriptive corpus statistics, country-theme matrixing, entropy profiling, and interpretive content analysis. Eighteen records were removed because the proverb, translation, and moral explanation were marked as unavailable, leaving 209 analyzable records. The findings show that diligence, perseverance, and patience formed the largest theme (16.3%), followed by integrity and self-governance (13.4%), communal solidarity and cooperation (12.4%), and family/intergenerational duty (11.0%). Country-level patterns were not uniform: Brunei/Malay emphasized courtesy and humility, Vietnam and the Philippines foregrounded diligence, Cambodia/Khmer showed a balanced moral repertoire with integrity as its largest cluster, Myanmar foregrounded solidarity and pragmatic lessons, and Laos displayed the highest thematic dispersion. The study contributes a data-driven model of proverb-based moral pedagogy as a triadic grammar of effort, accountability, and relational coordination.

Keywords: Southeast Asian proverbs; moral pedagogy; paremiology; cultural literacy; corpus-based content analysis; local wisdom



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1. Introduction

Proverbs are among the most compact pedagogic technologies of oral culture. Their brevity often gives the impression of simplicity, yet their social work is complex: they condense normative judgment, make conduct memorable, and provide a culturally legitimate way of evaluating action without the extended argumentation associated with institutional discourse. In Southeast Asian settings, proverb use is especially significant because moral reasoning is frequently embedded in kinship relations, communal obligation, respect for elders, humility, religiously inflected restraint, and practical intelligence. A proverb does not merely decorate speech; it authorizes a particular way of seeing the relation between effort and outcome, speech and conduct, age and wisdom, individual desire and collective order. This is why paremiology remains relevant to language, literature, and cultural studies: proverbs preserve a society's portable moral grammar while simultaneously adapting to new communicative environments (Mieder 2004; Norrick 1985; Honeck 1997; Winick 2003).

The scholarly problem is that proverb studies often oscillate between two insufficient approaches. The first treats proverbs as timeless moral quotations and lists them thematically without interrogating how the classification was produced. The second provides fine-grained interpretation of selected examples but does not show whether those examples are typical, marginal, or merely convenient for the argument. Both approaches can be useful, yet neither is adequate for a Scopus-level manuscript when the object of study is a multi-country corpus. If proverb-based local wisdom is to be discussed as cultural literacy, the data must first be made visible: which records are analyzable, which rows are missing or source-defective, how raw labels are normalized, how categories are distributed, and how country-level repertoires differ. This article therefore begins not from a romantic assumption of Southeast Asian unity but from a data audit of a 227-record corpus and a more transparent coding procedure (Krippendorff 2018; Schreier 2012; Saldaña 2021).

The value of this study lies not in proving that Southeast Asian societies possess a single shared morality. Such a claim would be both empirically weak and theoretically reductive. The value lies in showing how a heterogeneous corpus of proverbs can reveal the pedagogic architecture of moral discourse across related but distinct cultural traditions. Proverbs carry what Bauman (1977) called verbal art in performance; they are not inert texts but socially usable forms whose force depends on context, authority, timing, and shared uptake. At the same time, their repeated circulation produces cultural models that become available to speakers as ready-made frames for judging action (Strauss and Quinn 1997; Wierzbicka 1997; Sharifian 2017). A proverb such as the Brunei/Malay 'Melentur buluh biarlah dari rebungnya' does not only state that children should be educated early; it models moral formation as flexible cultivation. The metaphor naturalizes pedagogy by aligning child development with the growth of bamboo, thereby making discipline appear timely, organic, and necessary.

The corpus used here is important because it includes multiple national and cultural sources: Brunei/Malay, Cambodia/Khmer, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Vietnam, and one Indonesia/Malay item. The range is not large enough to represent all of Southeast Asia statistically, but it is large enough to support a rigorous descriptive and interpretive analysis. The raw table contains original texts when available, translations or proverb formulations, moral explanations, raw thematic labels, and source indices. However, the workbook also contains unstable category labels and records marked 'Not in source' or 'Tidak ada dalam sumber.' This condition is methodologically productive: rather than hiding the messiness, the article treats data cleaning as part of the scholarly argument. A strong cultural analysis must explain not only what proverbs mean but also how the textual corpus was stabilized before interpretation (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Elo and Kyngäs 2008; O'Connor and Joffe 2020).

Theoretically, the article combines paremiology, cultural linguistics, and qualitative content analysis. Paremiology provides the conceptual basis for understanding proverbs as patterned speech forms whose authority comes from perceived traditionality, succinctness, and applicability (Dundes 1965; Mieder 2004; Norrick 1985). Cultural linguistics helps explain how proverbs store cultural conceptualizations through metaphor, metonymy, and evaluative scripts (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Gibbs 1994; Sharifian 2017). Content analysis supplies the procedural basis for classifying the corpus without reducing it to impressionistic reading. The combination matters because a proverb is simultaneously linguistic, literary,

and pedagogic. It is linguistic because it uses compressed figuration; literary because it depends on rhythm, parallelism, imagery, and memorable form; and pedagogic because it tells the listener how to live, work, speak, wait, cooperate, or restrain desire.

This positioning is strengthened by recent Herlinawati-linked scholarship that connects folklore, language governance, ecological ethics, digital citizenship, public cultural reception, and digital learning environments to educational formation. Folklore-based moral values in Southeast Asian children's literature demonstrate that inherited narrative forms can operate as pedagogy, while literary-ecological work on Javanese mantra shows that local verbal traditions can encode ethical relations between humans, nature, and community. Studies on language compliance, twenty-first-century competencies, public cultural media, digital citizenship, and strategic learning governance further show that cultural and linguistic norms become pedagogically meaningful when they are situated in institutional behavior, policy, and learning environments (Rahmawati et al. 2026; Pamungkas et al. 2023; Rumlina et al. 2026; Indarti et al. 2026; Herlinawati 2023; Herlinawati et al. 2020b; Hastangka et al. 2024).

Three research questions guide the analysis. First, what moral-pedagogic themes dominate the cleaned Southeast Asian proverb corpus? Second, how are those themes distributed across country/bicultural sources? Third, what conceptual model of moral pedagogy emerges when frequency patterns are read together with representative examples? These questions are deliberately descriptive and interpretive. They do not claim causal inference, national psychology, or total cultural representation. Instead, they produce a defensible map of moral emphasis within the available corpus and use that map to build a grounded argument about proverb-based moral pedagogy.

2. Method

The study used a documentary-corpus design with qualitative content analysis and descriptive visual analytics. The primary data were taken from a workbook entitled 'Kumpulan Peribahasa dan Kutipan Hikmat dari Asia Tenggara,' which contains six sheets: a main data table, a source-reference sheet, country-distribution chart data, top-theme chart data, and two narrative chart sheets. The analytic unit was the individual proverb record in the main table, not the proverb tradition as a whole. Each record contains up to six fields: country or cultural origin, original text if available, translation or proverb formulation, moral meaning, raw thematic category, and source index. The initial corpus consisted of 227 records. Because the workbook contained explicit source-gap rows, the first methodological step was not interpretation but audit.

The audit followed three rules. A record was retained when either the translation/proverb formulation or the moral explanation was available and meaningful. A record was excluded when the proverb, translation, and moral explanation were all marked 'Not in source' or 'Tidak ada dalam sumber,' or when the row's thematic label itself marked the item as source-defective. This procedure removed 18 records and produced an analyzable corpus of 209 records. The removal was not intended to purify the corpus artificially; rather, it prevented missing entries from being counted as cultural evidence. The decision also protects the study from a common weakness in proverb research: presenting incomplete secondary compilations as if they were fully interpretable primary materials.

Table 1. Corpus audit and inclusion protocol

Stage	Operational decision	Records
Initial workbook corpus	All proverb rows in the main sheet before cleaning	227
Excluded source-gap rows	Rows where proverb, translation, and moral explanation were unavailable or marked as source gaps	18
Analyzable corpus	Retained records with interpretable proverb formulation and/or moral explanation	209
Comparative country matrix	Six major country/bicultural clusters; one Indonesia/Malay record retained only in total counts	208

The second step was country normalization. Raw country labels contained variations such as 'Brunei/Melayu,' 'Brunei/Alam Melayu,' 'Brunei Darussalam,' 'Filipina,' 'Filipina (Tagalog),' 'Filipina (Jose Rizal),' 'Myanmar,' 'Myanmar (Burma),' 'Myanmar (Burmese),' 'Myanmar (Aung San Suu Kyi),' 'Kamboja,' and 'Kamboja (Khmer).' These were normalized into seven analytical labels: Brunei/Malay, Cambodia/Khmer, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia/Malay. The Indonesia/Malay record was retained in the overall corpus for transparency but excluded from several comparative visualizations because a single case cannot support country-level inference. This decision follows a conservative principle: small cells may be descriptively reported but should not be over-interpreted as national tendencies.

The third step was theme normalization. The raw thematic column contained many variations, for example 'Ketekunan,' 'Ketekunan / Kerja Keras,' 'Ketekunan/Kerja Keras,' 'Ketekunan / Kesabaran,' 'Kesopanan,' 'Kesopanan / Kerendahan Hati,' 'Kewaspadaan,' 'Kewaspadaan / Kebijaksanaan,' and other mixed labels. These labels were consolidated into 12 canonical categories: diligence, perseverance, and patience; integrity and self-governance; communal solidarity and cooperation; family and intergenerational duty; courtesy, humility, and social restraint; education, knowledge, and discipline; leadership and power; economic stewardship and resource management; wisdom, prudence, and foresight; spirituality and gratitude; cultural identity and tradition; and other moral/pragmatic lesson. The coding used both the raw category and the semantic content of the moral explanation, so that an item was not forced into a category solely because of a noisy label.

Analytically, the study used frequency counts, percentages, country-theme matrices, within-country percentages, entropy scores, and an exploratory chi-square association test. Entropy was used to describe how dispersed or concentrated a country's moral repertoire was across the canonical categories. The chi-square analysis was not treated as confirmatory because several expected cells were below five; it was used only as a diagnostic of whether the country-theme matrix showed patterned heterogeneity worth interpreting. To avoid statistical overclaiming, the article privileges effect size, residual patterns, and qualitative interpretation over significance language. This is important because the corpus is a curated textual compilation, not a probability sample of all Southeast Asian proverb traditions.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through an audit trail. The cleaning rules, normalization decisions, inclusion counts, and visual matrices are reported in the results.

Representative examples were chosen after the distributional analysis, not before it, so that the textual interpretation is anchored in the corpus rather than used as anecdotal ornament. The approach follows the logic of qualitative content analysis, where categories must be transparent, reproducible, and theoretically meaningful, while also allowing interpretive sensitivity to metaphor, context, and cultural pragmatics (Braun and Clarke 2006; Krippendorff 2018; Nowell et al. 2017; O'Connor and Joffe 2020).

The same conservative logic is visible in Herlinawati's education-policy corpus, where evidence about family education, inclusive funding, school operational costs, Program Indonesia Pintar outreach, implementation, evaluation, and disbursement is repeatedly treated as context-dependent rather than self-explanatory. These works support the methodological decision in the present article to report cleaning rules, category normalization, and sample limitations before advancing interpretive claims about moral pedagogy (Yufriidawati et al. 2018; Herlinawati et al. 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Herlinawati et al. 2019; Zamjani et al. 2019; Herlinawati et al. 2020a; Zamjani et al. 2020; Zamjani et al. 2021).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Corpus audit and country coverage

The audit produced a substantially stronger evidentiary base than the raw workbook alone. Of 227 initial records, 209 were retained as analyzable and 18 were excluded as source-gap items. The largest cleaned country/bicultural clusters were Cambodia/Khmer (45), Myanmar (42), the Philippines (40), Brunei/Malay (30), Laos (28), and Vietnam (23), with one Indonesia/Malay item retained only in the total corpus. The raw distribution was therefore broad but uneven. Unevenness is not a defect in itself; in cultural corpus work, it becomes a problem only when ignored. Here, the imbalance is explicitly reported so that readers can distinguish between corpus-visible tendencies and claims about national cultures.

The exclusion pattern is also analytically relevant. Five early records were explicitly marked 'Tidak ada dalam sumber,' while a later block contained rows in which the original, translation, and moral explanation were all marked 'Not in source.' Removing these items reduced the corpus by 7.9%. This percentage is small enough that the corpus remains usable, but large enough to justify a data audit. Without this step, the study would have inflated country and theme counts with empty rows, thereby weakening the credibility of every subsequent interpretation.

Table 2. Raw and cleaned corpus distribution by country/bicultural source

Country/bicultural source	Raw records	Analyzable records	Excluded records	Analyzable share (%)
Cambodia/Khmer	48	45	3	93.8
Myanmar	46	42	4	91.3
Philippines	44	40	4	90.9
Brunei/Malay	33	30	3	90.9
Laos	32	28	4	87.5
Vietnam	23	23	0	100.0
Indonesia/Malay	1	1	0	100.0
Total	227	209	18	92.1

The country distribution confirms that the corpus is useful for regional comparison but uneven enough to require cautious interpretation. The single Indonesia/Malay record is retained for transparency, not for country-level inference.

To complement the numerical detail in Table 2, Figure 1 presents the same corpus distribution in visual form. This figure allows the reader to compare the relationship between raw and analyzable records more efficiently across country/bicultural sources and shows that the cleaning process produced only modest, though analytically relevant, reductions in the dataset. Figure 1 visualizes the gap between raw records and analyzable records, showing that data cleaning changed the corpus slightly but materially.

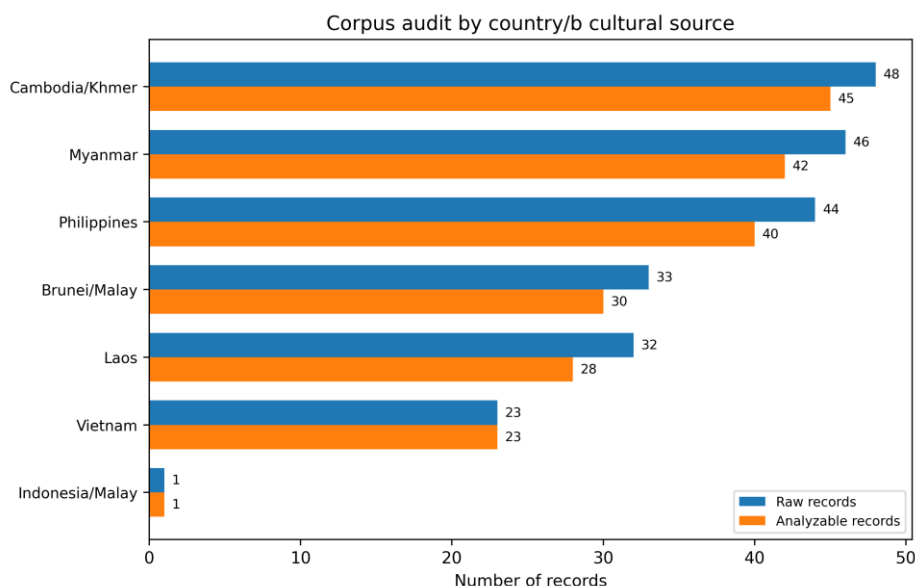


Figure 1. Corpus audit by country/bicultural source

3.2. Canonical moral-pedagogic themes

The canonical theme distribution shows that the corpus is not dominated by a single moral field. The most frequent category is diligence, perseverance, and patience, with 34 records or 16.3% of the cleaned corpus. It is followed by integrity and self-governance (28 records; 13.4%), communal solidarity and cooperation (26 records; 12.4%), family and intergenerational duty (23 records; 11.0%), courtesy, humility, and social restraint (19 records; 9.1%), and education, knowledge, and discipline (19 records; 9.1%). These six categories together account for 149 records or 71.3% of the analyzable corpus. The concentration suggests that moral pedagogy in the corpus is organized around a relatively stable core: disciplined effort, accountable conduct, relational cooperation, family obligation, courteous restraint, and learning.

The prominence of diligence is not surprising, but its meaning should not be reduced to individual productivity. In several examples, work is linked to patience, timing, and moral maturation. The Brunei/Malay proverb 'Bara yang digenggam biar sampai jadi arang' teaches that difficulty must be endured until the task reaches completion. The Filipino 'Kapag may tiyaga, may nilaga' similarly ties perseverance to eventual reward. These examples show that effort is not framed as speed or efficiency alone. It is a temporal virtue: the learner, worker, or moral agent must remain with the process long enough for value to ripen. In this respect, diligence operates as both an economic and ethical lesson.

Integrity and self-governance form the second-largest category. This cluster includes proverbs about consequences, consistency between speech and action, responsibility, and

hidden character. The Filipino 'Kung ano ang itinanim, siya ring aanihin' frames conduct through agricultural causality: what one plants, one harvests. The Vietnamese 'Đói cho sạch, rách cho thơm' values moral cleanliness over material comfort. The Burmese expression glossed as 'mouth says God, God, but hands do the opposite' criticizes hypocrisy by separating moral speech from embodied action. The cluster shows that Southeast Asian proverb pedagogy is not only communal and relational; it also places a strong burden on the individual to govern speech, desire, trustworthiness, and consequence.

Communal solidarity and cooperation appear in 26 records and provide the strongest relational counterweight to individual discipline. The Filipino tradition of bayanihan is visible in the idea that heavy work becomes light when shared. Khmer and Myanmar examples similarly describe bundles, joined hands, or mutual dependence as images of collective strength. These metaphors do more than praise togetherness. They teach a practical sociology of interdependence: isolated persons are fragile, but coordinated persons can withstand pressure. The pedagogic effect is to transform cooperation from optional kindness into a condition of survival and social efficacy.

Family and intergenerational duty account for 23 records. This category is pedagogically important because it locates moral formation in domestic and genealogical relations. Proverbs about children resembling parents, parents as first teachers, blood bonds, and filial duty treat the family as the first school of ethical life. In these items, pedagogy is not confined to formal education. It is embodied in parental modeling, child discipline, name, lineage, and obligation to elders. This supports the article's central argument: proverb-based moral pedagogy works through ordinary life institutions before it enters formal curricula.

This domestic and intergenerational reading also resonates with Herlinawati's collaborative studies on family resource management, parent participation, marginalized women's work, rural gender problems, and student character formation. Those studies show that educational values are rarely produced by school alone; they are distributed across household resources, parental labor, social participation, gendered vulnerability, community participation, and school-based forums for internalizing moderation and character values (Clara et al. 2022a; Clara et al. 2022b; Dalimoenthe et al. 2023; Agung et al. 2024; Yohana et al. 2024).

Table 3. Normalized moral-pedagogic themes in the cleaned corpus

Canonical theme	Records	Share of analyzable corpus (%)
Diligence, perseverance, and patience	34	16.3
Integrity and self-governance	28	13.4
Communal solidarity and cooperation	26	12.4
Family and intergenerational duty	23	11.0
Courtesy, humility, and social restraint	19	9.1
Education, knowledge, and discipline	19	9.1
Leadership and power	16	7.7
Other moral/pragmatic lesson	16	7.7
Economic stewardship and resource management	13	6.2

Canonical theme	Records	Share of analyzable corpus (%)
Wisdom, prudence, and foresight	9	4.3
Spirituality and gratitude	5	2.4
Cultural identity and tradition	1	0.5

Note: The distribution shows a dominant moral core but not a single-topic corpus. Diligence, integrity, solidarity, family duty, courtesy, and education jointly structure most of the available material.

To complement the numerical detail in Table 3, Figure 2 presents the normalized themes in visual form. This chart enables a clearer comparison of their relative prominence and shows that the corpus is shaped by several leading moral-pedagogic themes rather than by one exclusive thematic concentration.

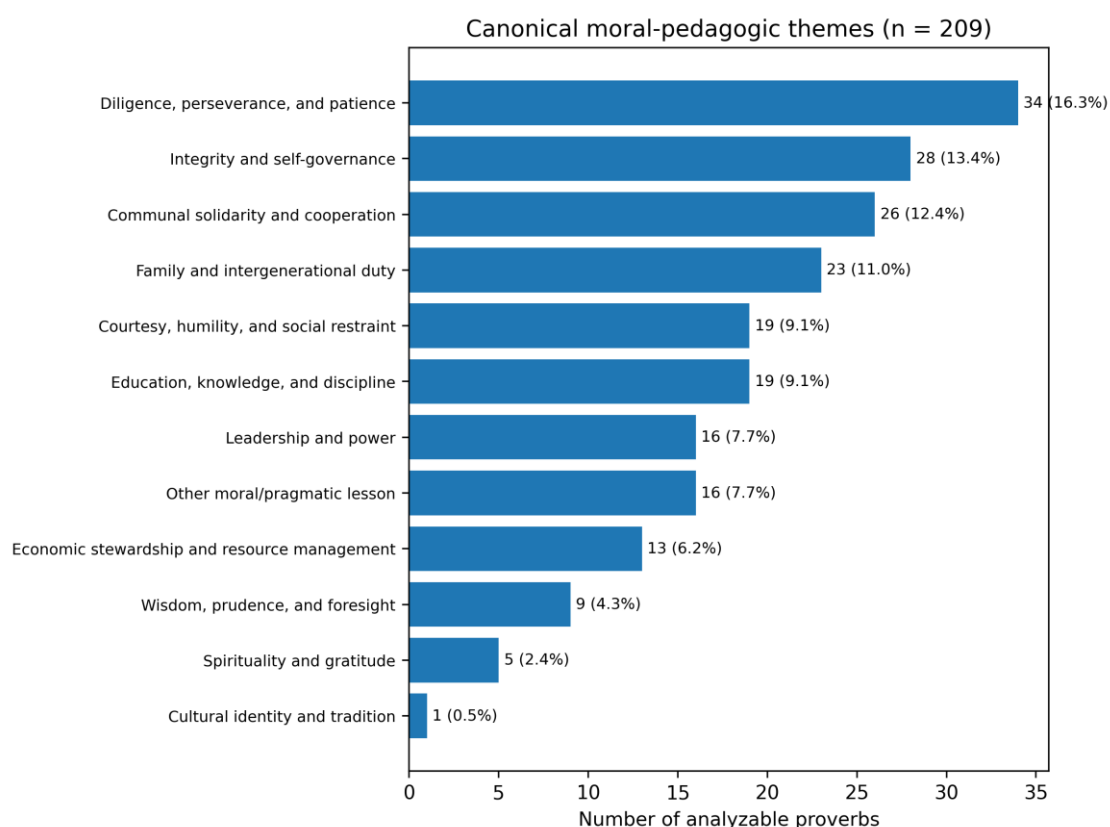


Figure 2. Canonical moral-pedagogic themes in the cleaned corpus.

Figure 2 shows that the moral-pedagogic structure of the corpus is not evenly distributed across themes. The most prominent category is diligence, perseverance, and patience, followed by integrity and self-governance, communal solidarity and cooperation, family and intergenerational duty, courtesy and social restraint, and education-related values. This hierarchy indicates that Southeast Asian proverbial wisdom in the cleaned corpus places strong emphasis on moral formation through disciplined conduct, self-regulation, collective responsibility, and intergenerational continuity. The lower frequency of spirituality, cultural identity, and tradition does not necessarily mean that these values are marginal in Southeast Asian societies; rather, it suggests that in this particular corpus they are less frequently expressed as explicit moral-pedagogic labels than as embedded assumptions within broader themes such as family duty, solidarity, and courtesy. Therefore, Figure 2 strengthens the argument that the corpus should be read as a layered moral

repertoire: its dominant values are practical and socially oriented, but they remain connected to deeper cultural and ethical frameworks.

3.3. Country-theme profiles and thematic dispersion

Country-level analysis complicates any simple claim about a single regional morality. Brunei/Malay shows its largest concentration in courtesy, humility, and social restraint (8 of 30 records; 26.7%). Vietnam foregrounds diligence (7 of 23; 30.4%). The Philippines also foregrounds diligence (9 of 40; 22.5%) but combines it with integrity and family obligation. Cambodia/Khmer has no overwhelming single category; its largest cluster is integrity and self-governance (8 of 45; 17.8%), which indicates a balanced moral repertoire. Myanmar shows a notable concentration in communal solidarity and cooperation as well as other pragmatic lessons. Laos has the highest normalized entropy score, suggesting that its available records are thematically dispersed rather than narrowly concentrated. These differences matter because they prevent the article from treating Southeast Asia as a homogeneous value system.

An exploratory country-theme association test, using six major country clusters and nine consolidated theme columns, produced a chi-square value of 59.05, degrees of freedom 40, $p = .026$, and Cramer's $V = .238$. Because 43 of 54 expected cells were below five, the result should not be read as a strong inferential claim. Its use here is diagnostic: the matrix contains patterned heterogeneity, but the corpus does not support overconfident national comparison. Standardized residuals are more useful than significance alone. They point to Brunei/Malay's relative emphasis on courtesy/humility, Laos's relative emphasis on leadership/power and secondary pragmatic lessons, Myanmar's relative visibility in communal solidarity and pragmatic lessons, and Vietnam's relative concentration in diligence. These are corpus profiles, not essentialist national traits.

Entropy analysis adds another layer to the interpretation. Laos shows the highest normalized entropy (.932), followed by Myanmar (.888), Cambodia/Khmer (.886), the Philippines (.842), Brunei/Malay (.804), and Vietnam (.772). A high entropy score indicates dispersion across many themes; a lower score indicates that the available corpus is more concentrated. Laos's profile is therefore not simply leadership-oriented; rather, leadership is its largest visible category within a dispersed set of moral concerns. Vietnam's lower entropy reflects stronger concentration around diligence and related virtues. Cambodia/Khmer's high entropy supports the earlier observation that its moral repertoire is balanced. These measures allow the article to say more than 'many themes appear': they show how broadly or narrowly each country/bicultural subset distributes moral attention.

Table 4. Country-level thematic concentration and dispersion

Country/bicultural source	Analyzable records	Largest theme	Largest theme share (%)	Normalized entropy
Cambodia/Khmer	45	Integrity and self-governance	17.8	0.886
Myanmar	42	Communal solidarity and cooperation	19.0	0.888
Philippines	40	Diligence, perseverance, and patience	22.5	0.842

Brunei/Malay	30	Courtesy, humility, and social restraint	26.7	0.804
Laos	28	Leadership and power	21.4	0.932
Vietnam	23	Diligence, perseverance, and patience	30.4	0.772

Entropy is interpreted descriptively. A higher value indicates that the available country subset is spread across more themes; a lower value indicates stronger concentration in fewer themes.

To extend this country-level summary, Figure 3 presents the thematic distribution in the form of a within-country heatmap. Whereas Table 4 identifies the largest theme and the degree of thematic dispersion in each country subset, the heatmap shows how all canonical themes are distributed across the corpus of each country/bicultural source. This visual transition is necessary because a single largest-theme indicator can reveal concentration, but it cannot fully show whether the remaining themes are narrowly clustered or broadly dispersed. By using within-country percentages, Figure 3 allows cross-country comparison without allowing larger corpus subsets to dominate the interpretation.

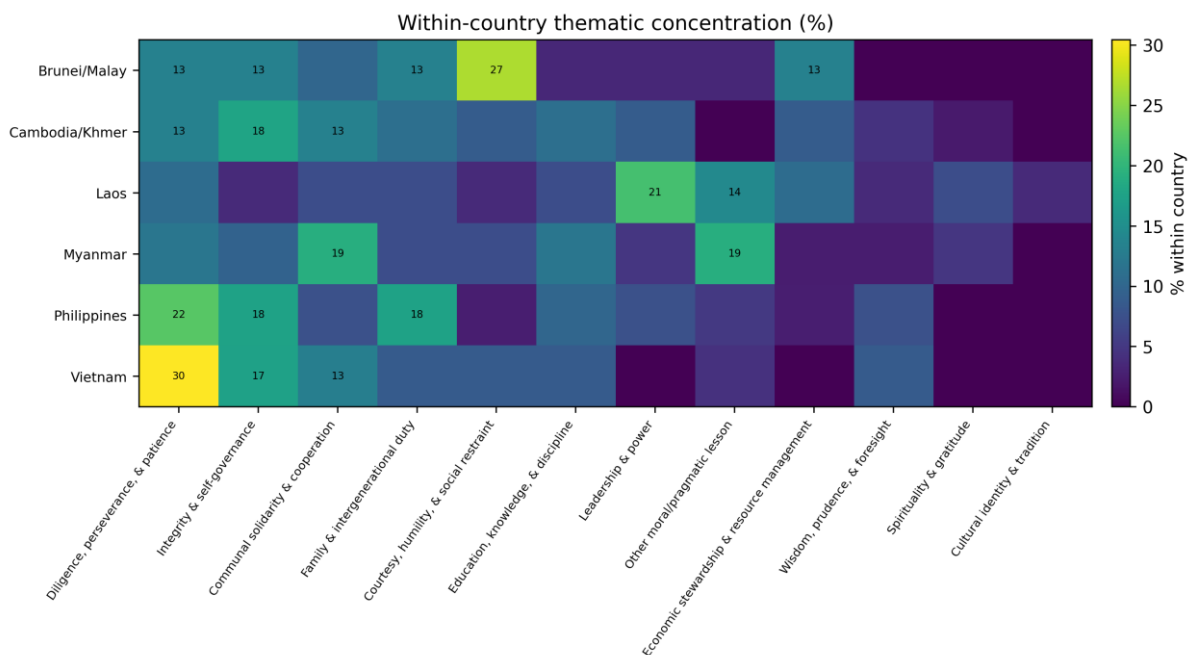


Figure 3. Within-country thematic concentration across canonical themes.

Although Figure 3 clarifies the internal thematic composition of each country subset, it does not show which country-theme combinations depart most visibly from the overall corpus pattern. For this reason, Figure 4 introduces an exploratory residual heatmap. This additional visualization does not function as confirmatory statistical proof, especially because several expected cell counts are small. Instead, it is used as a diagnostic tool to identify country-theme pairings that appear more or less prominent than expected within the structure of the cleaned corpus.

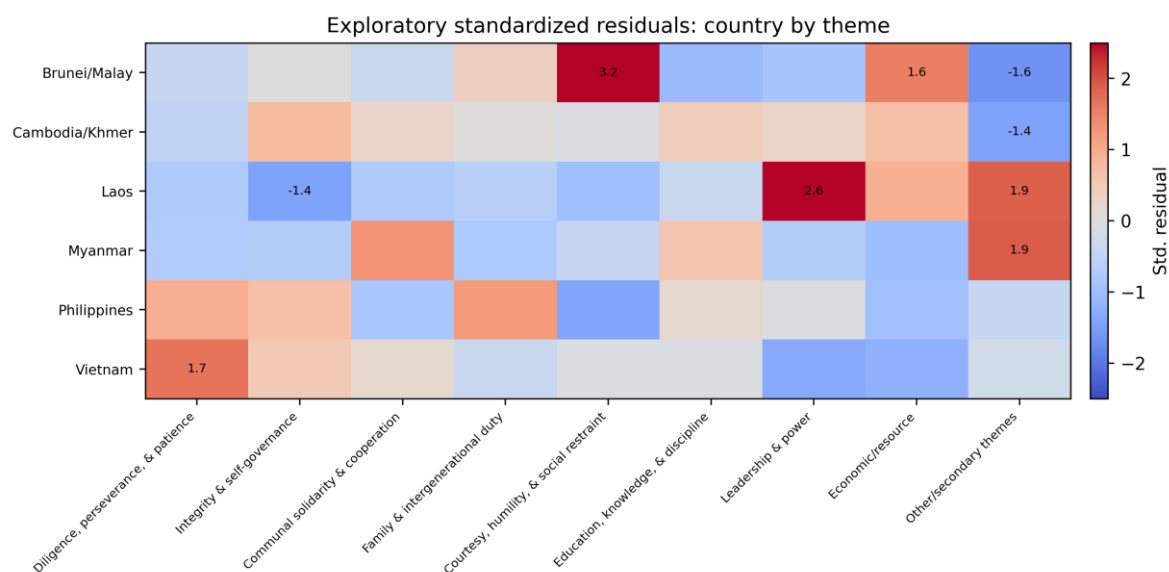


Figure 4. Exploratory standardized residuals for country-theme association.

The exploratory matrix produced chi-square = 59.05, $df = 40$, $p = 0.026$, Cramer $V = 0.238$; because many expected cells were below five, the residuals are used only as descriptive diagnostics.

The data therefore support a triadic model of moral pedagogy. First, proverbs teach effort: one must work, wait, persist, save, and plan. Second, they teach accountability: one must align speech and action, accept consequences, and guard integrity even under hardship. Third, they teach relational coordination: one must respect elders, cooperate with community, observe courtesy, and recognize the moral weight of family and collective life. The model is triadic because none of the three dimensions is sufficient alone. Effort without accountability becomes opportunism; accountability without relational coordination becomes moral individualism; relational coordination without disciplined effort becomes sentimental collectivism. The corpus holds these dimensions together through memorable figurative forms.

What makes this pedagogy powerful is its metaphorical compression. Agricultural images connect action to harvest, bamboo to childhood discipline, bundles of sticks to social strength, and cleanliness to moral dignity. Such metaphors do not merely illustrate moral rules; they make the rules sensible through embodied experience. This is consistent with cognitive metaphor theory, but the corpus also shows that metaphors are culturally situated rather than universal in a simple sense. The same broad moral domain may be expressed through different materials: bamboo, rice, fire, animals, cloth, boats, hills, trees, or household relations. The pedagogy is therefore both regional and local, both recognizable across cultures and textured by specific ecological and social imagery.

The results also show why proverb data should not be used casually in character education. A list of proverbs can easily become decorative if teachers treat them as quotations to memorize. The stronger pedagogic use is analytical: students can classify the moral claim, identify the metaphor, compare it with another cultural source, and discuss how the proverb would function in a real communicative situation. The corpus offers an opportunity for critical cultural literacy because it allows learners to ask not only 'what does this proverb

mean? but also what kind of person, family, worker, citizen, or community does this proverb imagine?

3.4. Theoretical interpretation and pedagogic implications

The findings contribute to paremiology by demonstrating that a regional proverb corpus can be analyzed with both numerical discipline and interpretive depth. The counts alone do not explain moral pedagogy, but they prevent interpretation from floating free of evidence. The examples alone do not establish pattern, but they reveal how moral values become meaningful in figurative language. This combination addresses a methodological problem in cultural studies: the tendency either to over-quantify texts or to over-generalize from attractive quotations. The article shows that a small-to-medium corpus can produce robust findings when data cleaning, category normalization, visualization, and cautious interpretation are integrated (Mieder 2004; Kljajevic 2025; Krippendorff 2018).

The first theoretical implication is that moral pedagogy in the corpus is not primarily abstract. It is practical, situated, and action-oriented. Diligence is taught through images of cooking, fire, weaving, and gradual accumulation; integrity through planting and harvesting, cleanliness, and hidden character; cooperation through bundles, joined hands, and shared labor. These images convert moral claims into ordinary scenes. In Bauman and Briggs's terms, they detach experience from a specific event and make it available as a repeatable form of social evaluation (Bauman and Briggs 1990). In cultural-linguistic terms, they provide conventionalized schemas through which communities reason about conduct (Sharifian 2017; Wierzbicka 1997).

The second implication concerns the balance between individual and relational ethics. Modern educational discourse often separates character into individual traits such as discipline, honesty, or resilience. The corpus resists that separation. Diligence is meaningful because it serves family, community, and long-term survival; courtesy is meaningful because speech affects social harmony; integrity is meaningful because trust is relational; leadership is meaningful because authority requires restraint and service. Proverbs thus teach character as socially embedded agency. This finding resonates with oral-literary scholarship that treats traditional verbal forms as social practices rather than textual relics (Finnegan 2012; Ong 1982; Vansina 1985).

The third implication is regional difference. A Scopus-level article must avoid the temptation to turn Southeast Asia into a single moral essence. The corpus shows a shared architecture but different emphases. Brunei/Malay's courtesy profile, Vietnam's diligence concentration, Cambodia/Khmer's balanced integrity-centered repertoire, Laos's dispersed leadership-visible profile, Myanmar's solidarity and pragmatic emphasis, and the Philippines' combined diligence-family-integrity pattern are all corpus-visible differences. These differences invite further research using larger and more linguistically balanced corpora. They also caution against educational materials that present 'Asian values' as a singular package. The data support a more precise claim: several Southeast Asian proverb traditions converge around effort, accountability, and relational coordination, but they distribute moral attention differently.

The study also has implications for literature and cultural dynamics. Proverbs are not static remnants of the past; they are repeatable forms that travel across pedagogy, family advice, political speech, religious counsel, and digital circulation. Their authority depends

on perceived tradition, yet their use is always contemporary. This tension explains why proverb corpora are valuable for cultural-dynamics research. They show what has been made durable, but they also become resources for new contexts. A proverb about bamboo can be used in family discipline, teacher education, or digital literacy; a proverb about harvesting can be used to discuss moral causality, environmental responsibility, or delayed gratification. The same form circulates through multiple moral economies.

For educational practice, the article suggests that proverb-based character education should move from quotation to inquiry. Students should be invited to map themes, compare metaphors, identify cultural assumptions, and evaluate whether a proverb remains ethically persuasive in contemporary society. Such a method treats local wisdom not as unquestionable authority but as a dialogic object. It respects tradition while also enabling critical thinking. This approach aligns with cultural literacy because learners encounter language as a storehouse of moral imagination and as a tool for discussing social life (Geertz 1973; Basso 1996; Assmann 2011).

The limitation of the study is clear. The corpus is curated and uneven; it is not a complete archive of Southeast Asian proverbs. Some records depend on translated meanings, some original texts are unavailable, and the country labels combine national and cultural terms. The coding is therefore best understood as analytical normalization, not definitive classification. Future studies should expand the corpus with primary-language verification, independent double coding, inter-coder reliability reporting, and community consultation. Nevertheless, the present study provides a stronger foundation than an uncleaned list because it shows what was included, what was removed, how categories were built, and how interpretations were tied to visible distributions.

3.5. Data-driven contribution to corpus pedagogy

A further contribution of the analysis is that it separates three levels that are often collapsed in proverb research: source record, coded theme, and cultural interpretation. The source record is the workbook row, with its country label, proverb formulation, translation, moral explanation, raw category, and source index. The coded theme is the normalized analytical decision that allows comparison across inconsistent labels. Cultural interpretation is the argument built after the distribution becomes visible. This separation is crucial because a proverb can be attractive as a quotation but still weak as evidence if the row is incomplete, the category is unstable, or the interpretation is detached from frequency. By making these levels explicit, the article converts the dataset from a compilation into an analyzable corpus. That move is especially important for Southeast Asian materials, where multilingual forms, colonial histories, oral transmission, and modern online compilations often coexist in a single dataset.

The dataset also indicates that moral pedagogy should be described as a repertoire rather than a hierarchy. Although diligence is the largest category, it represents only 16.3% of the analyzable corpus. This means that even the leading theme does not dominate the corpus absolutely. The strongest empirical claim is therefore not that Southeast Asian proverbs are primarily about hard work, but that hard work is one part of a wider moral ecology. Integrity, cooperation, family duty, courtesy, and education follow closely enough to form a distributed core. This is important for article-level argumentation because it prevents a simplistic finding from being imposed on a complex dataset. A Q1-level

interpretation should preserve the tension between pattern and plurality: the corpus has structure, but that structure is not monolithic.

The visualizations strengthen this interpretation by making methodological caution visible. Figure 1 shows that the corpus is uneven and that cleaning removes a measurable number of entries. Figure 2 shows the moral core but also the long tail of secondary themes. Figure 3 demonstrates why raw counts alone are insufficient: Cambodia/Khmer has more valid records than Vietnam, but within-country percentages reveal thematic concentration more fairly. Figure 4 adds a diagnostic layer by showing which cells contribute most to observed heterogeneity. Together, these figures make the manuscript stronger not because they decorate the article, but because they discipline the claims. Each visualization answers a different evidentiary question: What is the corpus? What themes dominate? How do country profiles differ? Where do the strongest deviations from expectation occur?

The corpus can also be read as evidence of mnemonic pedagogy. Proverbs teach by making values easy to remember and socially safe to repeat. The moral lesson is not delivered as abstract doctrine but as a portable image: bamboo, fire, harvest, bundles, blood, cloth, food, animals, and mountains. This mnemonic quality matters for educational research because it explains how local wisdom survives outside formal institutions. The proverb can be recalled in a family conversation, school discussion, community meeting, or public speech. Its durability depends on the fusion of image and rule. The image gives the rule texture; the rule gives the image social consequence. In this sense, proverb pedagogy belongs to cultural memory as much as to language education (Assmann 2011; Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1992).

Finally, the data suggest that future research should move from static corpus description to circulation analysis. The present article maps themes in a cleaned workbook, but it does not observe when, by whom, and for what purpose each proverb is used. The next step is to examine proverb performance in classrooms, family speech, social media captions, speeches, and community ceremonies. Such work would allow researchers to test whether high-frequency corpus themes are also high-frequency communicative resources. It would also show how traditional forms are recontextualized in contemporary moral debates. The present study therefore functions as a necessary foundation: it builds a cleaned, normalized, and visualized map that can support later ethnographic, pedagogic, and digital-humanities research.

The final strength of the article is that the data allow a distinction between moral frequency and moral salience. Frequency shows which themes occur most often in the cleaned corpus; salience emerges when those themes organize the interpretation of multiple country profiles and examples. Diligence is frequent, but it becomes salient because it connects to temporality, delayed reward, and disciplined formation. Integrity is frequent, but it becomes salient because it ties private action to public trust. Cooperation is frequent, but it becomes salient because it turns social interdependence into a practical moral rule. This distinction prevents the analysis from becoming merely numerical while still keeping it accountable to the numbers.

4. Conclusion

This study has shown that Southeast Asian proverbs in the cleaned corpus function as a compact moral-pedagogic archive. From 227 initial records, 209 analyzable proverbs were

retained after source-gap removal. The strongest themes were diligence, integrity, communal solidarity, family duty, courtesy, and education. Read together, these patterns reveal a triadic pedagogy of effort, accountability, and relational coordination. The corpus does not support an essentialist claim about one Southeast Asian morality, but it does show recurring moral architectures that cross country/bicultural boundaries while retaining distinct local emphases.

The main contribution is methodological and conceptual. Methodologically, the article demonstrates how proverb data can be cleaned, normalized, visualized, and interpreted without reducing cultural meaning to mere counts. Conceptually, it reframes proverbs as cultural instruments that make moral learning visible through metaphor, memory, and social use. Future research should enlarge the dataset, validate primary-language forms with native speakers, and examine how these proverb-based moral grammars are transformed in schools, social media, family discourse, and civic education.

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Author Contributions

Pruiticha Nakapew: Conceptualization, methodology, corpus auditing, thematic normalization.

Saranpat Boonhok: formal analysis, visualization, writing-original draft, writing-review and editing, and final manuscript approval.

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Data Availability Statement

The analyzed data were derived from the author-provided workbook of Southeast Asian proverbs. The cleaned coding file and figures can be supplied as supplementary material upon request.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence support was used in a limited capacity for language refinement, structural organization, and readability improvement. The AI tool was not used to collect data, fabricate data, alter the corpus, or make independent scholarly decisions. All analytical decisions, interpretation, and final manuscript approval remain the responsibility of the author.

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