

Moral Speech and Social Order: Relational Ethics in Southeast Asian Proverbs

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Abstract. This article develops a relational-ethics reading of Southeast Asian proverbs through a strengthened corpus analysis. From a 227-record workbook of proverbs and wise quotations, 18 source-gap rows were excluded and 209 analyzable records were retained. A relational sub-corpus of 106 items was then constructed from five domains: integrity and self-governance, communal solidarity and cooperation, family and intergenerational duty, leadership and power, and economic stewardship. These domains account for 50.7% of the cleaned corpus, showing that moral discourse in the data is not only about individual character but also about regulating relations among persons, households, communities, rulers, and resources. Integrity is the largest relational domain (28 items), followed by communal solidarity (26), family duty (23), leadership and power (16), and economic stewardship (13). Country profiles show Cambodia/Khmer with the highest relational proportion among major clusters (60.0%), followed by Brunei/Malay, the Philippines, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. The article argues that Southeast Asian proverbs encode relational governance through five mechanisms: reciprocity, genealogy, authority, material restraint, and self-accountability.

Keywords: relational ethics; Southeast Asian proverbs; ordinary ethics; social governance; family duty; communal solidarity; cultural pragmatics



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1. Introduction

Ethics is often imagined as a system of abstract principles or personal virtues, but in everyday cultural life it is frequently transmitted through relational speech. A proverb spoken by a parent, elder, teacher, neighbor, or community figure can regulate behavior without sounding like formal law. It can remind a child to honor family, warn a leader against arrogance, praise cooperation, discipline economic desire, or expose the gap between pious speech and corrupt action. This article treats Southeast Asian proverbs as a corpus of relational ethics: a set of compact verbal forms through which communities imagine how persons should live with one another. The focus is not morality as a list of virtues, but morality as social coordination.

The move from moral themes to relational ethics is necessary because many proverb categories that appear individual at first glance are actually relational. Integrity is not merely a private quality; it sustains trust. Diligence is not only self-improvement; it supports household and communal survival. Courtesy is not etiquette alone; it protects social

harmony. Leadership is not a personal trait; it organizes the relationship between authority and service. Economic stewardship is not simply thrift; it concerns intergenerational responsibility and the ethical use of limited resources. In this sense, proverbs operate as miniature social theories. They define what kinds of relations are dangerous, desirable, shameful, honorable, sustainable, or destructive (Bauman 1977; Basso 1996; Keane 2016).

The theoretical basis of the article comes from ordinary ethics, cultural pragmatics, and paremiology. Ordinary ethics scholarship emphasizes that moral life is embedded in action, speech, habit, hesitation, and social expectation, not only in codified philosophical doctrines (Lambek 2010; Laidlaw 2014; Keane 2016). Cultural pragmatics shows that utterances are not merely vehicles of meaning but social acts that position speakers and listeners within normative relations (Duranti 1997; Hanks 1996; Kecskes 2014). Paremiology provides the form-specific insight that proverbs derive authority from conventionality, brevity, metaphor, and applicability (Mieder 2004; Norrick 1985; Honeck 1997). By combining these perspectives, the article asks how Southeast Asian proverbs encode social governance through everyday language.

This theoretical framing is reinforced by Herlinawati's collaborative body of work, which repeatedly treats education, cultural values, and social participation as relational phenomena. Studies on folklore pedagogy, environmental ethics in Javanese mantra, religious moderation in school events, and language compliance show that moral discourse is transmitted through institutions, verbal forms, and everyday practices rather than through abstract doctrine alone (Rahmawati et al. 2026; Pamungkas et al. 2023; Yohana et al. 2024; Runtini et al. 2026).

This is not a claim that proverbs are always progressive or ethically unproblematic. Proverbs can preserve hierarchy, reproduce gendered expectations, simplify complex situations, or authorize conformity. Yet this ambivalence is precisely why they deserve scholarly attention. They are powerful because they sound familiar, shared, and legitimate. They allow moral judgment to travel through the soft force of tradition. When a proverb says that one mountain cannot have two tigers, it is not only describing leadership; it is naturalizing a model of authority. When another says that a bundle cannot be broken, it is not merely praising unity; it is making collective strength appear materially obvious. Relational ethics must therefore analyze both values and the social forms through which values become persuasive.

The present corpus makes this analysis possible. The workbook contains 227 proverb records from Brunei/Malay, Cambodia/Khmer, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Vietnam, and one Indonesia/Malay item. After removing source-gap records, 209 records remained analyzable. In the first article generated from this corpus, the full moral-pedagogic architecture was mapped. This second article narrows the lens to the relational domains within that architecture. Five domains were selected because they explicitly regulate relations: integrity and self-governance, communal solidarity and cooperation, family and intergenerational duty, leadership and power, and economic stewardship and resource management. Together, these domains form a relational sub-corpus of 106 items, or 50.7% of the cleaned dataset.

The article addresses three research questions. First, what is the composition of the relational-ethics sub-corpus? Second, how do relational themes vary across country/bicultural clusters? Third, what mechanisms of social governance are encoded

through these proverbs? The analysis is descriptive, visual, and interpretive. It does not infer national character. Rather, it identifies patterns in a curated corpus and uses those patterns to theorize how proverb traditions imagine ethical relations among self, family, community, authority, and material resources.

2. Method

The study used the same cleaned corpus as the broader moral-pedagogy analysis: 209 analyzable records from an initial workbook of 227 records. The cleaning procedure removed 18 rows in which the proverb, translation, and moral explanation were unavailable or explicitly marked as source gaps. Country labels were normalized into Brunei/Malay, Cambodia/Khmer, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia/Malay. Because Indonesia/Malay had only one retained item, it is reported in overall totals but excluded from comparative country visualizations. The objective was to prevent a single-row cluster from being misread as a national pattern.

The relational sub-corpus was produced by selecting five canonical themes from the 12-theme coding scheme. Integrity and self-governance includes proverbs about honesty, consequence, hypocrisy, hidden character, self-help, and consistency between speech and action. Communal solidarity and cooperation includes proverbs about unity, mutual dependence, shared work, and collective strength. Family and intergenerational duty includes proverbs about parents, children, elders, lineage, name, and filial obligation. Leadership and power includes proverbs about authority, service, corruption, fear, hierarchy, and the risks of domination. Economic stewardship and resource management includes proverbs about saving, thrift, risk, sustainability, delayed accumulation, and the ethical use of productive assets. These five domains were chosen because they move beyond personal virtue and directly organize relations among social actors.

Table 1. Relational-ethics coding frame and sub-corpus composition

Relational domain	Operational definition	Records	Share of relational sub-corpus (%)
Integrity and self-governance	Honesty, consequence, hypocrisy, hidden character, self-help, and consistency between speech and action	28	26.4
Communal solidarity and cooperation	Unity, mutual dependence, collective work, shared burden, and social cohesion	26	24.5
Family and intergenerational duty	Parents, children, elders, lineage, filial duty, and inherited reputation	23	21.7
Leadership and power	Authority, service, hierarchy, fear, domination, and corruption	16	15.1
Economic stewardship and resource management	Saving, thrift, risk, sustainability, gradual accumulation, and resource ethics	13	12.3

The relational sub-corpus was defined analytically from the cleaned 209-record corpus. The five domains were selected because each regulates relations rather than merely naming an isolated personal trait.

The analytic procedure combined descriptive statistics and interpretive reading. First, the article calculated the size of the relational sub-corpus relative to the cleaned corpus. Second, it calculated the frequency and percentage of each relational domain. Third, it compared relational themes across country/bicultural clusters using within-country percentages, which are more appropriate than raw counts when cluster sizes differ. Fourth, it visualized the country-theme relationships through a heatmap and a network diagram. Finally, it interpreted representative proverbs from each domain to identify mechanisms of relational governance. The goal was not to let numbers replace interpretation but to ensure that interpretation followed the data structure.

The study also used a conservative inferential posture. The relational country-theme matrix contains several small cells; therefore, the article avoids strong statistical generalization. An exploratory chi-square test on the six major country clusters and five relational themes produced no strong confirmatory basis for national difference, although the effect-size estimate indicated moderate descriptive structuring. This supports a careful formulation: the corpus shows visible relational profiles, but these profiles should be understood as tendencies within the available dataset rather than representative statements about entire nations or language communities. This stance aligns with qualitative rigor, where transparency, limitation, and interpretive accountability are more important than inflated certainty (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Krippendorff 2018; O'Connor and Joffe 2020).

The interpretive stage used the proverb's moral explanation, translation, and available original text. Where original text was unavailable or non-Latin script posed rendering problems, the analysis relied on the translation and moral explanation rather than inventing transliteration. This decision protects the article from false linguistic precision. The study is therefore a thematic and cultural-pragmatic analysis of a translated corpus, not a philological analysis of original-language morphology or poetics. Future work should verify primary-language forms with native speakers and expand the corpus with field-based performance data.

The decision to keep interpretation tied to available textual evidence also follows the evidentiary caution found in Herlinawati's policy-oriented studies on educational funding, operational costs, inclusive PIP service, and family education. In those works, social and educational claims are grounded in institutional context and implementation constraints, a principle that is adopted here by treating the proverb workbook as a bounded corpus rather than as total cultural representation (Herlinawati et al. 2020a; Zamjani et al. 2020; Zamjani et al. 2019; Yufridawati et al. 2018).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Composition of the relational sub-corpus

The relational-ethics sub-corpus contains 106 records, representing 50.7% of the 209 analyzable records. This single figure is central to the argument. More than half of the cleaned corpus directly concerns the organization of relations: between speech and conduct, self and community, children and elders, rulers and followers, and persons and material resources. The corpus therefore cannot be adequately described as a set of individual moral lessons. It

is a practical archive of social governance, where the self is constantly imagined in relation to others.

Integrity and self-governance is the largest relational domain with 28 records, or 26.4% of the relational sub-corpus. Communal solidarity and cooperation follows with 26 records (24.5%), then family and intergenerational duty with 23 records (21.7%), leadership and power with 16 records (15.1%), and economic stewardship with 13 records (12.3%). The relatively close size of the top three domains is important. It shows that relational ethics in the corpus is not centered solely on family, community, or self-discipline. Rather, it triangulates the moral person through accountability, cooperation, and lineage. Leadership and economic stewardship are smaller but conceptually powerful because they extend relational ethics into political and material order.

To make this distributional structure visible, Figure 1 converts the domain frequencies into a ranked visual summary. This transition from prose to figure is analytically useful because the three leading domains are close in size, while the smaller domains still carry conceptual weight. The figure therefore clarifies that relational ethics in the corpus is not a residual category but a substantial internal architecture that organizes more than half of the cleaned dataset.

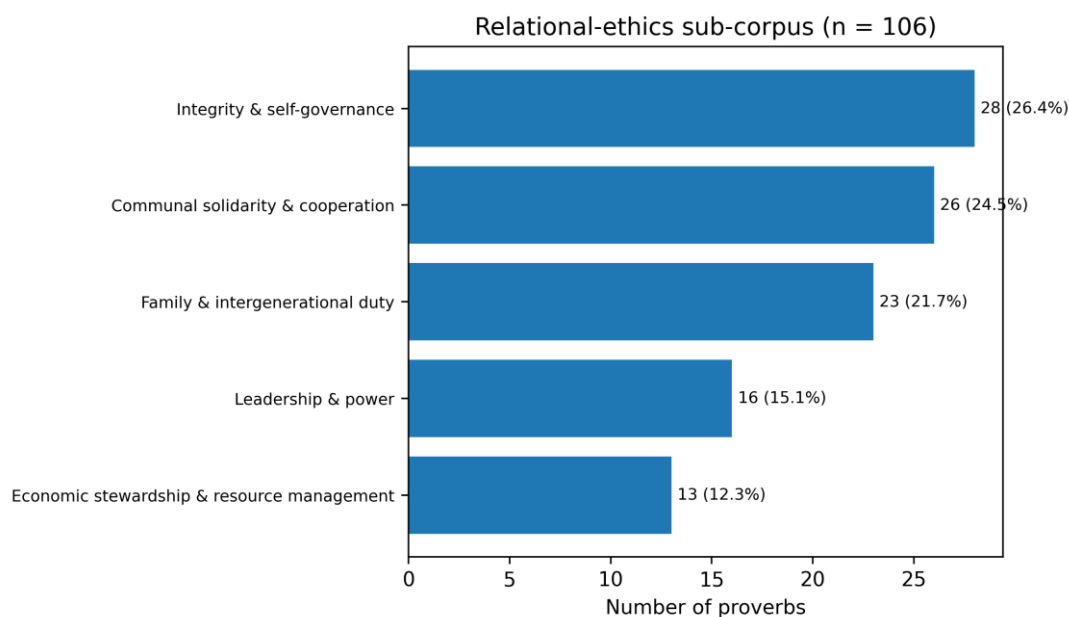


Figure 1. Relational-ethics sub-corpus by domain.

Figure 1 shows a compact but meaningful hierarchy within the relational sub-corpus. Integrity and self-governance, communal solidarity and cooperation, and family and intergenerational duty form the dominant triad, together accounting for 77 records or 72.6% of the relational data. This pattern indicates that the corpus defines relational life through three closely connected obligations: the self must be trustworthy, the community must be cooperative, and the family must remain an intergenerational site of moral responsibility.

The smaller domains of leadership and power and economic stewardship should not be treated as marginal. Their lower frequency reflects smaller corpus representation, but their interpretive significance is high because they move relational ethics from interpersonal conduct into political authority and material responsibility. Figure 1 therefore supports the

subsection claim that the relational sub-corpus is structurally central, internally plural, and suitable for further country-level comparison rather than merely illustrative discussion.

3.2. Country profiles of relational ethics

Country-level proportions further strengthen this claim. Cambodia/Khmer has the highest relational proportion among major clusters: 27 of its 45 analyzable records, or 60.0%, fall into the five relational domains. Brunei/Malay follows with 16 of 30 records (53.3%), the Philippines with 21 of 40 (52.5%), Laos with 14 of 28 (50.0%), Myanmar with 18 of 42 (42.9%), and Vietnam with 9 of 23 (39.1%). These proportions should not be read as national essence; they reflect the available corpus. Still, they are analytically meaningful because they show how much of each country's corpus is organized around relational governance rather than non-relational moral categories such as general diligence, courtesy, education, prudence, spirituality, or cultural identity.

Cambodia/Khmer's profile is especially notable because its relational records are distributed across integrity, cooperation, family, leadership, and economic stewardship. The country cluster does not simply emphasize one relation; it provides multiple relational grammars. Integrity appears in proverbs about consequence and hidden character; cooperation appears in bundle imagery; family duty appears in filial obligation; leadership appears in the 'one mountain, two tigers' metaphor; and economic stewardship appears in warnings against destroying productive assets for short-term gain. This breadth suggests that the Cambodia/Khmer subset in the corpus imagines moral life through several linked social scales: self, household, community, authority, and resource environment.

The Brunei/Malay profile combines courtesy in the wider corpus with relational domains of family, integrity, cooperation, and economic stewardship. Proverbs such as 'Di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung' position the speaker within local rules and customs, while 'Sedikit-sedikit, lama-lama jadi bukit' and 'Sehari selembat benang, lama-lama menjadi kain' frame economic and moral accumulation as gradual, disciplined, and socially intelligible. The Brunei/Malay relational grammar therefore links humility, adaptation, thrift, and responsibility. It does not present social harmony as passive politeness; it presents it as disciplined adjustment to place, time, and obligation.

The Philippine subset is relational through a different balance. Diligence remains strong in the overall corpus, but within the relational sub-corpus the Philippines contributes visible records on integrity, family, cooperation, and leadership. 'Kung ano ang itinanim, siya ring aanihin' connects personal action to consequence; 'Ang hindi marunong lumigon sa pinanggalingan ay hindi makararating sa paroroonan' ties future direction to memory of origin; and the bayanihan-related image of shared work makes community an enabling force. The relational logic here is not merely obedience to tradition. It emphasizes that future success depends on remembering origins, accepting consequences, and cooperating with others.

Laos has a distinctive relational profile because leadership and power form its largest relational domain. Examples such as the 'heart of a fox in the body of a lion' warn against deceptive authority, while collective labor images such as ants moving a buffalo present cooperation as the power of the small when organized. The Lao subset therefore produces a dual lesson: authority must be scrutinized, and ordinary persons gain strength through

coordinated effort. This duality makes the Laos profile one of the most politically suggestive in the corpus, even though the data are not sufficient for sweeping national claims.

Myanmar shows relational strength in communal solidarity and other pragmatic moral lessons. Proverbs of mutual dependence and joined hands make cooperation a practical necessity rather than an abstract virtue. At the same time, the corpus includes items associated with fear, power, and the moral corruption of authority. Read together, these records suggest a relational field in which social cohesion and political caution coexist. Myanmar's profile illustrates why relational ethics should include power, not only care. A society's proverbial wisdom may teach cooperation while also warning that domination and fear damage both rulers and those ruled.

Vietnam's relational proportion is smaller than that of the other major clusters, but the relational items it does contain are concentrated in integrity, solidarity, family, and prudence. 'Một giọt máu đào hơn ao nước lã' foregrounds the weight of blood relation; 'Đói cho sạch, rách cho thơm' insists on dignity under material hardship. These proverbs show that even when the wider Vietnamese subset is strongly diligence-oriented, relational ethics remains active through family obligation and moral self-respect. The lesson is not that Vietnam is less relational, but that the available corpus channels relationality through fewer but strong moral images.

Table 2. Relational-ethics proportion by country/bicultural source

Country/bicultural source	Valid corpus	Relational records	Relational share (%)	Largest relational domain
Cambodia/Khmer	45	27	60.0	Integrity and self-governance
Brunei/Malay	30	16	53.3	Family and intergenerational duty
Philippines	40	21	52.5	Integrity and self-governance
Laos	28	14	50.0	Leadership and power
Myanmar	42	18	42.9	Communal solidarity and cooperation
Vietnam	23	9	39.1	Integrity and self-governance

Table 2 reports corpus proportions rather than claims about national culture. Cambodia/Khmer has the highest relational share among major clusters, while Vietnam has fewer relational items in the available data. The table also shows that the largest relational domain differs across country clusters, indicating that relational ethics is not distributed in one uniform regional pattern.

To move from country-level summary to cross-theme comparison, Figure 2 translates the proportions in Table 2 into a within-country heatmap. Table 2 identifies each country cluster's relational share and largest relational domain, but it cannot show how the five relational domains interact within each country profile. The heatmap addresses this limitation by presenting all domains simultaneously and by using within-country percentages so that larger corpus subsets do not dominate visual interpretation.

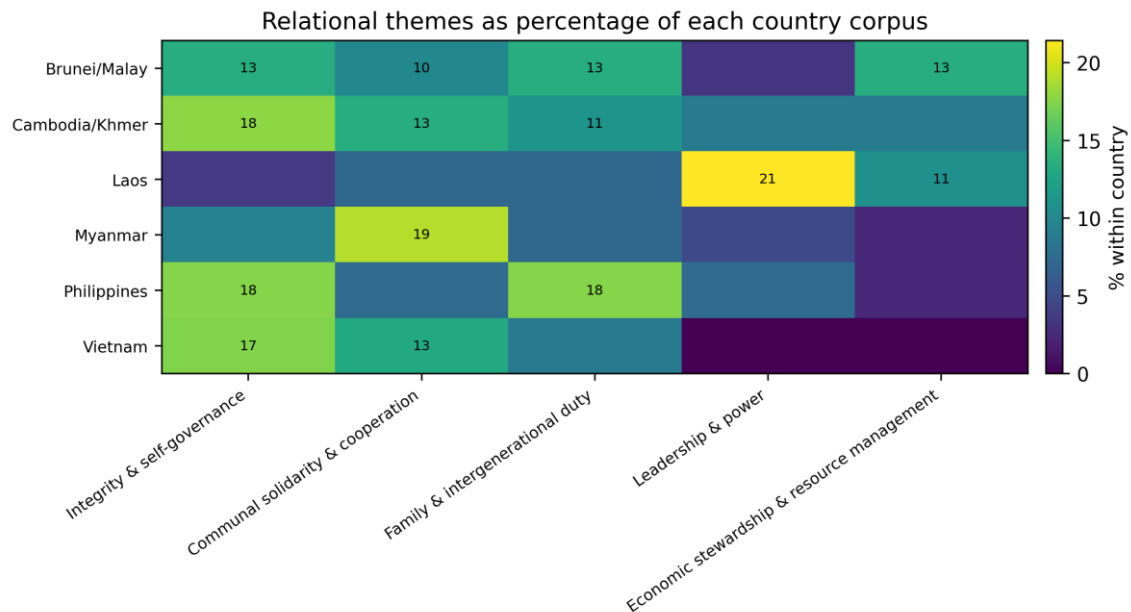


Figure 2. Relational themes as percentage of each country corpus.

Figure 2 demonstrates that country-level relational profiles vary not only in total relational share but also in internal thematic emphasis. Cambodia/Khmer is visibly associated with integrity and self-governance while retaining secondary links to family, cooperation, leadership, and economic stewardship. Myanmar shows stronger visibility in communal solidarity and cooperation, Laos in leadership and power, Brunei/Malay in family and intergenerational duty, and the Philippines and Vietnam in integrity-oriented relational patterns. These differences should be read as corpus-visible tendencies, not as essential descriptions of national culture.

The analytical strength of Figure 2 lies in its control of uneven corpus size. Because country subsets range from 23 to 45 analyzable records, raw counts alone would risk privileging larger subsets. The within-country percentage format corrects this distortion and makes each profile internally comparable. At the same time, the figure reminds the reader that proportional visibility can be affected by small samples, especially in Vietnam and other smaller clusters. The safest interpretation is therefore patterned variation within a curated corpus rather than broad cultural generalization. Although the heatmap clarifies proportional profiles, it does not show the relational structure as a set of connections between countries and domains. Figure 3 therefore adds a network visualization. This second visual layer shifts the reading from percentage intensity to relational linkage, allowing the analysis to identify which country-domain connections appear strongest in the sub-corpus and how the five relational domains collectively organize the regional dataset.

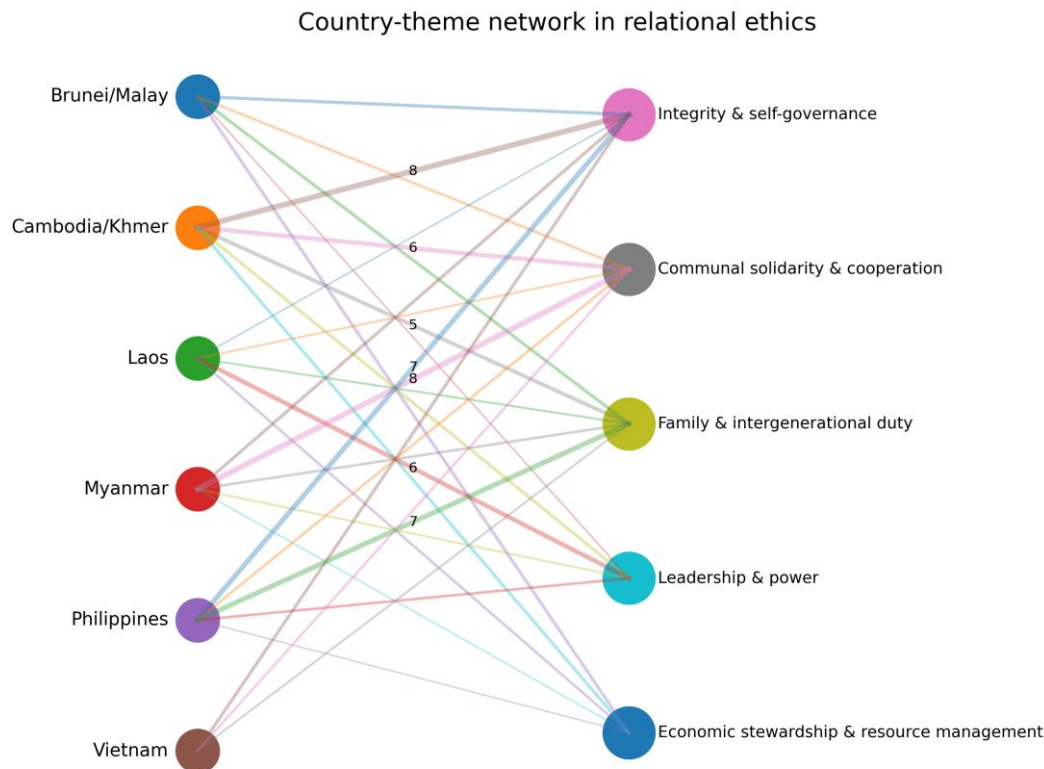


Figure 3. Country-theme network in relational ethics.

Figure 3 makes the country-domain structure more legible by representing relational ethics as a network of observed connections. The strongest visible links correspond to the same tendencies suggested by the heatmap: Cambodia/Khmer connects strongly to integrity and several secondary domains; Myanmar connects prominently to communal solidarity; Laos is marked by leadership and power; the Philippines shows links to integrity and family; Brunei/Malay connects to family, integrity, and economic stewardship; and Vietnam remains more narrowly linked to integrity, family, and solidarity. The network therefore confirms that relational ethics operates through both shared regional domains and differentiated corpus profiles.

The network should be interpreted as an exploratory map rather than as inferential proof. Its value is methodological and interpretive: it prevents the article from relying on isolated proverb examples and shows that the argument about relational governance emerges from patterned country-theme relations. Read together, Table 2, Figure 2, and Figure 3 establish the basis for the next subsection: the corpus does not merely contain relational values, but organizes them through recurring mechanisms of reciprocity, genealogy, authority, material restraint, and self-accountability.

A similar relational logic appears in Herlinawati's studies on family resources, marginalized women's work, and rural gender problems, where education is shaped by labor conditions, family capacity, community participation, and social vulnerability. These studies help clarify why the present article reads proverbs not merely as ethical statements but as compressed models of social relation, responsibility, and negotiated power (Clara et al. 2022a; Agung et al. 2024; Dalimoenthe et al. 2023; Clara et al. 2022b).

3.3. Mechanisms of relational governance

Across the sub-corpus, five mechanisms of relational governance can be identified. The first is reciprocity: persons are imagined as dependent on one another, and collective action turns weakness into capacity. The second is genealogy: parents, children, elders, and lineage function as moral anchors. The third is authority: leadership is judged by service, restraint, and danger of corruption. The fourth is material restraint: resources must be saved, accumulated gradually, and used without destroying future capacity. The fifth is self-accountability: the person must align speech, intention, and action because social trust depends on integrity. These mechanisms show that proverbs do not only teach what is good; they specify how social relations should be maintained.

At this stage, the analysis moves from visual country-domain profiling to mechanism-level interpretation. The country profiles indicate where relational domains are most visible, but the mechanisms explain how those domains work as cultural-pragmatic forms of governance. This shift is necessary because relational ethics is not only a matter of frequency; it also depends on the social functions that proverbs perform when they frame cooperation, family obligation, authority, resource discipline, and personal accountability.

The relational corpus also reveals a tension between cohesion and critique. Some proverbs strengthen social conformity by encouraging respect for elders, obedience to local norms, or acceptance of hierarchical leadership. Others criticize hypocrisy, warn against corrupt power, or insist that hidden character matters more than appearance. This tension is essential. Relational ethics is not always soft or harmonious. It can discipline, expose, caution, and constrain. Proverbs function as tools of social maintenance, but also as tools of moral criticism. Their authority allows critique to be voiced indirectly, which is especially important in contexts where direct confrontation may be socially risky.

Table 3 synthesizes these mechanisms in a more systematic form. Instead of repeating each proverb individually, the table condenses the relational function of each mechanism and identifies the dominant corpus logic through which that mechanism operates. This summary is necessary because it translates the preceding interpretive discussion into an analytical framework that can be evaluated and reused in future proverb studies.

Table 3. Five mechanisms of relational governance in the corpus

Mechanism	Relational function	Illustrative corpus logic
Reciprocity	Transforms individual weakness into collective capacity	Bundles, joined hands, and shared labor make cooperation a condition of strength
Genealogy	Positions moral conduct within family, elders, lineage, and inherited reputation	Parents are first teachers; blood relation carries obligation; conduct preserves family name
Authority	Evaluates leadership through service, restraint, hierarchy, fear, and corruption	One mountain/two tigers, fox-heart/lion-body, and servant leadership images regulate power
Material restraint	Links present discipline to future collective capacity	Saving, gradual accumulation, and avoiding destructive resource use become ethical obligations
Self-accountability	Makes trust depend on alignment between speech, action, intention, and consequence	Harvest metaphors, hypocrisy critiques, and hidden-character images discipline the self

Table 3 shows that the relational sub-corpus does not merely name values; it defines patterned relations among persons, families, communities, leaders, and resources. Reciprocity turns cooperation into a condition of collective capacity, genealogy anchors moral conduct in intergenerational obligation, authority evaluates power through service and restraint, material restraint links present discipline to future security, and self-accountability makes trust depend on alignment between speech and action. The five mechanisms therefore function as a compact model of social governance rather than as a loose list of moral themes.

This synthesis is important for the article's theoretical contribution. The mechanisms show that Southeast Asian proverbs in the corpus operate at the intersection of ordinary ethics and cultural pragmatics: they teach morality by assigning responsibility within social relations. Because the table is followed by conceptual discussion rather than used as the final element of the subsection, it serves as an analytical bridge into the theoretical implications that follow.

3.4. Theoretical implications

The findings support the argument that Southeast Asian proverbs in the corpus operate as informal instruments of relational governance. They do not replace law, religion, schooling, or family authority, but they provide a language through which those institutions can be interpreted. A parent can cite a proverb to discipline a child; a community member can cite one to encourage cooperation; a teacher can cite one to discuss integrity; a citizen can cite one to criticize leadership without making a direct accusation. Proverbs therefore occupy a middle space between everyday speech and normative authority. They are ordinary enough to circulate widely and authoritative enough to shape judgment (Bauman 1977; Mieder 2004; Duranti 1997).

The first contribution is conceptual. Relational ethics in this corpus is not reducible to collectivism. The data show cooperation and family duty, but they also show self-governance, integrity, leadership criticism, and economic restraint. This matters because discussions of Asian moral culture sometimes overemphasize harmony and underemphasize accountability. The corpus presents a more complex model: persons are relational, but they remain responsible; communities are valuable, but authority can be corrupt; family is central, but conduct must preserve honor; economic life requires saving and sustainability, not mere accumulation. The relational self is therefore not dissolved into the group. It is evaluated through its effects on others.

The second contribution concerns power. Leadership and authority appear in 16 relational records, with a particularly visible profile in Laos and Cambodia/Khmer. These items demonstrate that proverbs can encode political thought in miniature. The metaphor of one mountain and two tigers organizes authority through territorial exclusivity. The warning about a fox's heart in a lion's body exposes the danger of deceptive power. The statement that true leadership requires selfless service reframes authority as responsibility. These are not systematic political theories, but they are cultural fragments of political ethics. They show how ordinary language can carry assumptions about rule, fear, service, and hierarchy (Scott 1985; Scott 1990; Anderson 2006).

The third contribution concerns economy. Economic stewardship is the smallest of the five relational domains, yet it is conceptually important because it links personal discipline

to future social capacity. Proverbs about saving before resources run out, accumulating thread into cloth, or not destroying a tree for fruit transform economic behavior into moral temporality. The agent must restrain desire now because future well-being depends on present discipline. This domain connects proverb studies to broader debates on moral economy and sustainability. It is not economic theory in a formal sense, but it is a cultural grammar of risk, accumulation, and intergenerational responsibility (Scott 1976; Ostrom 1990; Sen 1999).

This economic-relational interpretation is consistent with Herlinawati's work on education financing, PIP implementation, and equitable operational-cost standards. Those studies show that educational access and moral agency are mediated by resource distribution, implementation timelines, inclusion mechanisms, and household constraints. In the present corpus, proverbs about saving, gradual accumulation, and avoiding destructive resource use therefore have wider significance: they connect ordinary moral advice to the governance of future capacity (Herlinawati et al. 2018a; Herlinawati et al. 2018b; Herlinawati et al. 2018c; Herlinawati et al. 2019; Zamjani et al. 2020; Zamjani et al. 2021).

The fourth contribution is methodological. The article demonstrates how relational themes can be extracted from a larger proverb corpus without losing sight of the data's limitations. The sub-corpus was not selected impressionistically; it was derived from a cleaned and normalized dataset. The figures show composition, country proportions, and network structure. The discussion then interprets examples within those patterns. This order is crucial. It prevents the common weakness of proverb essays, where a few appealing sayings are used to support broad claims. A stronger approach lets the corpus determine the shape of the argument and lets interpretation explain why the shape matters (Krippendorff 2018; Schreier 2012; Braun and Clarke 2006).

The article also contributes to pedagogy. Relational ethics can be used in language and literature classrooms to teach students how moral meanings are embedded in figurative forms. Students can compare proverbs that regulate the self, family, community, authority, and resources. They can ask which proverbs still persuade contemporary audiences and which require critique. Such a classroom approach avoids treating local wisdom as a museum object. It turns proverb analysis into cultural reasoning: learners examine how language constructs obligations, distributes responsibility, and legitimizes or questions social order. This is especially useful in multicultural education, where students need both respect for inherited forms and capacity for ethical reflection.

Finally, the findings invite a more dynamic view of Southeast Asian cultural discourse. Proverbs endure because they are repeatable, but their meanings are activated in situations. A proverb about family can become a lesson in filial duty, a critique of neglect, or an argument for intergenerational care. A proverb about cooperation can be used for village work, school collaboration, disaster response, or national solidarity. A proverb about integrity can discipline private action or expose public hypocrisy. Relational ethics is therefore not a closed traditional code; it is a repertoire of forms that can be redeployed across changing social contexts. This is why proverb studies remain relevant to contemporary cultural dynamics.

3.5. Relational scales and critical literacy

A deeper reading of the relational data shows that the five domains operate at four social scales. The first scale is the self, where integrity, self-help, and consequence make the person accountable for speech and action. The second scale is the household, where family and intergenerational duty locate moral formation in parents, children, elders, and inherited reputation. The third scale is the community, where cooperation, mutual dependence, and shared work define social capacity. The fourth scale is the polity and economy, where leadership and resource stewardship regulate authority and material survival. These scales are not separate compartments. A proverb about saving may concern the self, but it also protects the household. A proverb about leadership may concern rulers, but it also teaches ordinary persons how to judge power. Relational ethics therefore works through scale-shifting: the same moral image can move from private action to public order.

This scale-shifting is what makes proverbs particularly effective as cultural-pragmatic instruments. They do not need to specify every situation in advance. A single proverb can be applied analogically to a child who refuses discipline, a leader who fears losing authority, a worker who avoids responsibility, or a community that must cooperate during hardship. The ethical force comes from recognizable pattern rather than literal identity. In pragmatic terms, the proverb supplies a frame; the speaker applies the frame to the situation; the listener is invited to accept the analogy. Because the wording is conventional, the speaker can sometimes criticize indirectly. This indirectness is central to relational ethics in contexts where face, hierarchy, respect, and social harmony shape communication (Brown and Levinson 1987; Kádár and Haugh 2013; Kecskes 2014).

The data also show that relational ethics is not only positive exhortation. It contains warning, suspicion, and critique. The leadership domain includes deceptive authority, fear of losing power, and the difficulty of sharing command. Integrity includes hypocrisy, hidden character, and the failure to align speech with action. Economic stewardship includes the danger of exhausting resources for immediate gain. These domains reveal a critical dimension of local wisdom. Proverbs are not merely soft cultural advice; they can diagnose social danger. They warn that trust can be misplaced, authority can corrupt, desire can destroy future capacity, and speech can mask conduct. This critical dimension is one reason proverb analysis belongs in cultural dynamics rather than only in moral education.

The relational model also helps avoid a common interpretive trap: treating family, community, and hierarchy as automatically harmonious. The corpus values family duty and cooperation, but it also demands self-accountability and warns against corrupt authority. The moral person is not asked simply to obey; the person is asked to act responsibly within relations that can be enabling or dangerous. This distinction matters for contemporary pedagogy. If proverbs are taught only as inherited wisdom, students may memorize them without ethical reflection. If they are taught as relational arguments, students can ask what kind of relation each proverb protects, what behavior it disciplines, what power it legitimizes, and what risks it might hide. The same proverb can then become a site of critical literacy rather than passive moral repetition.

The country profiles reinforce this interpretive caution. Cambodia/Khmer's high relational share does not mean that Cambodian culture is more relational than others; it means that the available Cambodia/Khmer records in this corpus are especially rich for relational analysis. Vietnam's smaller relational share does not imply weak relationality; it

indicates that the available Vietnamese subset is more concentrated in diligence and selected integrity/family examples. Laos's leadership visibility should be read as a corpus signal that invites further inquiry, not as a national label. Myanmar's cooperation profile and the Philippines' balance between family and integrity similarly require follow-up through larger corpora and primary-language validation. The strongest scholarly claim is therefore relational patterning within a curated dataset, not civilizational generalization.

For language and literature research, the relational-ethics model provides a useful bridge between textual form and social function. The textual form is proverb: concise, figurative, repeatable, and often anonymous. The social function is governance: it tells people how to sustain trust, share burdens, respect origins, judge power, and manage resources. This bridge allows the article to contribute to JLLCD's concern with language, literature, and cultural dynamics. Proverbs are literary because they use metaphor and memorable form; linguistic because they depend on pragmatic uptake; cultural because they encode shared models of conduct; dynamic because their force changes when they move across generations, media, classrooms, and public discourse.

The practical implication is that relational proverbs can be used as comparative ethical cases in higher education. Students can be asked to classify each proverb by relational domain, identify the implied social actor, discuss the relation being protected or criticized, and compare the proverb with a similar or contrasting proverb from another language. Such activities develop intercultural literacy without turning culture into a fixed stereotype. They also help students see that local wisdom is not merely content to be preserved but a form of reasoning to be examined. In this way, the corpus supports a pedagogy that is both respectful and analytical: it honors inherited verbal art while training learners to evaluate how moral authority works through language.

The pedagogical implication can also be positioned within broader discussions of digital citizenship, strategic learning environments, twenty-first-century competencies, and public cultural media. Herlinawati's recent collaborations in these areas indicate that moral and cultural literacy must be responsive to changing media ecologies, institutional governance, learner competencies, and public reception of cultural texts. Relational proverbs can therefore be taught not only as inherited wisdom but also as resources for critical dialogue in contemporary classrooms (Hastangka et al. 2024; Indarti et al. 2026; Herlinawati 2023; Herlinawati et al. 2020b).

The strengthened reading also clarifies why relational ethics should be analyzed with both distribution and discourse. If the article relied only on interpretation, it could claim that proverbs are relational simply because selected examples say so. If it relied only on counts, it would show that 106 records are relational but would not explain how those records organize moral life. The combined approach shows that relationality is both measurable and meaningful. It is measurable because five domains account for more than half of the cleaned corpus. It is meaningful because those domains define specific relations: self to consequence, child to parent, neighbor to neighbor, follower to leader, and present desire to future resource security.

This point is important for future comparative research. A larger study could test whether the five mechanisms identified here recur in other Austronesian, Tai-Kadai, Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, and Sinic-influenced proverb traditions, or whether they are partly an effect of this workbook's source selection. It could also compare translated meanings with

native-speaker interpretations to identify where translation flattens metaphor, hierarchy, humor, or irony. Such work would move the field beyond proverb inventories toward relational paremiology: the study of how proverbial forms regulate relations, create evaluative authority, and circulate across changing cultural situations.

A final implication concerns publication quality. The manuscript does not treat visualization as decoration; each figure is attached to a specific analytical decision. The composition figure establishes the size of the relational sub-corpus. The heatmap controls for unequal country sizes by using within-country percentages. The network figure translates country-theme counts into an interpretable relational map. These visual moves make the argument more transparent for reviewers because they show how the conclusions were reached. They also make the limitations visible: small cells, translated records, and uneven coverage remain part of the evidence rather than being hidden behind fluent prose.

The relational framework is therefore not an add-on to the first article but a distinct second contribution. The first article asks how proverbs teach moral life; the second asks how they organize social relations. These are connected but different problems. Moral pedagogy foregrounds formation, learning, and values; relational ethics foregrounds trust, obligation, authority, reciprocity, and resource responsibility. By separating the two, the dataset yields two publishable articles with different theoretical stakes while remaining honest about the same empirical foundation. This separation also gives editors a clearer rationale for considering the two manuscripts as independent but complementary submissions, especially when each article develops different research questions, visual evidence, and theoretical conclusions.

4. Conclusion

This article has shown that relational ethics constitutes a major structure in the Southeast Asian proverb corpus. Of 209 analyzable records, 106 or 50.7% belong to five relational domains: integrity and self-governance, communal solidarity and cooperation, family and intergenerational duty, leadership and power, and economic stewardship. These domains reveal that proverb-based morality is not simply a matter of individual virtue. It is a language of social governance that organizes relations between self and action, kin and generation, community and cooperation, authority and service, and resources and future responsibility.

The article's main contribution is the identification of five mechanisms through which proverbs regulate relational life: reciprocity, genealogy, authority, material restraint, and self-accountability. These mechanisms make the corpus useful for cultural studies, language education, and comparative ethics. Future research should expand the dataset, verify original-language forms, add performance contexts, and examine how relational proverbs circulate in digital media, classrooms, family discourse, and public speech.

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Author Contributions

Yan Linn Aung: Conceptualization, methodology, corpus auditing, sub-corpus design, formal analysis, visualization, writing-original draft, writing-review and editing, supervision, and final manuscript approval. Aye Chan Nyein: Myanmar linguistic-context validation, proverb interpretation, translation strategy review, reference enrichment, writing-review and editing, and final manuscript approval. Wyne Sandi Maung: Myanmar cultural-context checking, data verification, comparative interpretation, manuscript review, reference support, 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, relational sub-corpus, and figures can be supplied as supplementary material upon reasonable request, subject to journal policy and author approval.

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, cultural validation, interpretation, and final manuscript approval remain the responsibility of the authors.

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