

LANGUAGES

VIETNAMESE PROVERBS: A WINDOW INTO VIETNAMESE CULTURE

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Abstract

This research aims to understand Vietnamese culture through an in-depth examination of over 8,000 Vietnamese proverbs. As an integral part of national tradition, these proverbs stand as a testament to thousands of years of accumulated wisdom and shared experiences. This study examines the core themes present in these proverbs: attitudes towards nature, society, and self. Further, it seeks to highlight the unique aspects of Vietnamese culture by comparing Vietnamese proverbs with their English counterparts. The intent is to illuminate the inherent beauty of the Vietnamese language, as well as to encapsulate the enduring cultural values, individual characteristics, and collective spirit embodied within the Vietnamese populace.

Keywords: Vietnamese culture, Vietnamese proverbs, English proverbs.

Introduction

People frequently reference water rice agriculture, nature-human harmony, emotion-biased culture, and so on while discussing Vietnamese culture. Why can we say that? The answer is because of Vietnamese literature, in which proverbs are an important basis from which to explore cultural traditions. The Vietnamese language has a distinct and wide repertory of folk songs, proverbs, and idioms. They are life lessons, perceptions of natural occurrences, or moral teachings that our predecessors synthesized and utilized to accurately characterize our customs and traditions [1, 2]. As can be observed, proverbs clearly and fully depict Vietnamese people's social lives. It has become the living encyclopedia for every generation. As Vo [2] argues "our ancestors, by virtue of proverbs, expressed their perspective on moral concepts or virtue ethics" (p.8). Proverbs may be viewed as a dictionary for Vietnam's cultural character, in which one can find appropriate Vietnamese actions in relation to others in family, community, and society [3]. Culture is defined by behavior. Our research aims to help readers understand the contributions of proverbs to Vietnamese culture

Literature Review

Definition of Proverbs

According to Wolfgang [4], a proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation. Wolfgang [4] emphasizes that for a sentence to be a "true" proverb, it must possess a certain "proverbiality"—a combination of pithiness and a sense of ancient authority that makes it stick in the public's memory of a culture.

Complementing this from the Vietnamese perspective, Nguyen [5] defines Vietnamese proverbs (tục ngữ) as complete sentences expressing a judgment, an observation, or a lesson of experience. In the Vietnamese context, proverbs are often distinguished from idioms (thành ngữ) by their structural completeness; while an idiom is a phrase used as a lexical unit, a proverb is a self-contained statement with rhythm and internal rhyme to convey folk wisdom regarding social behavior, weather, or labor.

Definition of Culture

It is not easy to define what culture is as culture is a complex, dynamic concept. In his foundational work, Jeff [6] describes culture not as a static collection of objects, but as a "shared set of meanings" that

a group uses to interpret the world. Culture is the "lived experience" and the social practices that define a community's identity.

Jeff [6] suggests that English culture is often characterized by individualism and a "low-context" communication style. In this framework, meaning is usually explicit and direct. Social values frequently revolve around personal liberty, privacy, and a linear view of time and progress. Proverbs in English often reflect these values of self-reliance and practicality. In contrast, Vietnamese culture is deeply rooted in collectivism and "high-context" communication. Drawing from Jeff's theories [6], Vietnamese social structures emphasize the importance of the family unit, hierarchy, and "face". There is a strong focus on harmony and indirectness in communication.

Vietnamese proverbs as a cultural tradition

Studies [1, 7, 8] emphasize the longstanding tradition of Vietnamese proverbs, emphasizing their role as a repository of accumulated wisdom and shared experiences. According to Ngo and Nguyen [9], proverbs are a testament to Vietnam's cultural heritage, reflecting values and beliefs that have been passed down through generations. Both authors emphasize the importance of proverbs in preserving accumulated wisdom and shared experiences within Vietnamese culture. These proverbs are considered a testament to Vietnam's cultural heritage and serve as a reflection of the values and beliefs that have been passed down through generations. Nguyen [7] provided insights into the historical and cultural context of Vietnamese proverbs, highlighting their enduring presence and influence. Likewise, other studies [3, 8] investigated the role of proverbs in Vietnamese society, shedding light on how these linguistic expressions contribute to the collective identity and cultural fabric of the Vietnamese people.

Interdisciplinary approaches to proverb analysis

The interdisciplinary approach allows for a more in-depth understanding of the proverbs' cultural, social, and linguistic dimensions. The study may investigate the language-specific features, syntactic structures, and semantic nuances of Vietnamese proverbs by drawing on linguistic perspectives [10]. Anthropological perspectives can shed light on the cultural context, societal norms, and values reflected in these proverbs. Furthermore, literary analysis can provide a deeper understanding of the figurative language, rhetorical devices, and narrative elements found in Vietnamese proverbs.

Comparative studies with English proverbs

The analysis focuses on identifying the central themes found in Vietnamese proverbs, specifically attitudes toward nature, society, and oneself [7]. Researchers hoped to discover the underlying cultural values, beliefs, and perspectives held by the Vietnamese people by investigating these themes. By comparing Vietnamese proverbs with English equivalents, the

researchers identify unique cultural elements that distinguish the two societies. These comparative studies provide valuable insights into the cultural nuances and uniqueness of Vietnamese proverbs, enhancing our understanding of Vietnamese society and its worldview [9].

Beauty of the Vietnamese language and cultural values

The research aims to uncover the subtleties and nuances embedded within Vietnamese proverbs, which serve as a vehicle for encapsulating and conveying the Vietnamese populace's cultural heritage and collective wisdom, through linguistic analysis. The study aims to improve our understanding of Vietnamese culture and its unique characteristics by appreciating the beauty and expressive potential of the Vietnamese language. It should be noted that the research paper would go into greater detail about how the linguistic aspects of Vietnamese proverbs contribute to conveying cultural values and the collective spirit of the Vietnamese people.

Research methodology

Participants: A sample of five students consists of two males and three females, who are currently enrolled at Tan Tao University in Tay Ninh Province. It is ensured that all participants have similar English language learning backgrounds and proficiency levels. These participants will provide valuable insights into Vietnamese proverbs from a cultural perspective.

Method: A quantitative research approach is used to gather data and analyze the participants' knowledge and attitudes toward Vietnamese proverbs.

Data collection: We conduct structured interviews with the participants and develop a set of standardized interview questions that focus on their familiarity with Vietnamese proverbs, understanding of cultural connotations, and personal interpretations and experiences related to proverbs.

Interview procedure: We schedule individual interviews with each participant, ensuring a comfortable and private environment and a consistent interview protocol to maintain uniformity across all interviews. The interviews are recorded with the participants' consent and take detailed notes during the interviews.

Discussion

Proverbs: cultural messengers

Proverbs are a type of cultural language that is used subtly and artistically to reflect the colors of one country's culture [1, 8]. This language is expressed differently in different countries. We can decode cultural signals from around the world by using proverbs. Idioms and proverbs are frequently used by the British in everyday language. The British, for example, use the phrase "drinks like a fish" to describe someone who consumes a lot of alcohol. Similarly,

"beggars can't be choosers" means that if you ask for a favor from someone else, you must accept whatever they give you.

Proverbs in Vietnamese culture serve as reflections of cultural behaviors and traditions, and they have a special place in communication. These succinct and meaningful expressions play an important role in effectively conveying ideas and emotions. Proverbs are used skillfully by writers to articulate their thoughts and convey emotions. However, it is important to note that proverbs are more than just linguistic devices; they embody a country's cultural essence.

Proverbs are effective vehicles for transmitting cultural messages because they serve as indicators of a group's or community's cultural characteristics and behavioral practices. People gain insights into a country's lifestyles, psychological structures, cultural traditions, and identity, as well as the collective sentiments of its people, by studying proverbs. Proverbs distill the national voice into brief but profound forms. They reveal intellectual perceptions of the world, society, and human interactions. Proverbs capture people's attitudes and approaches to navigating life's complexities, reflecting their values and the interpersonal dynamics of their society.

Examining proverbs provides a more in-depth understanding of a culture's intricate fabric. The value of proverbs lies in their ability to condense complex ideas and shared experiences into short, memorable phrases. The study of proverbs is an important avenue for deciphering the underlying beliefs, customs, and traditions that shape a nation's cultural tapestry.

Proverbs' study contributes to the larger field of cultural research because they serve as windows into a culture's mindset. The study of proverbs can teach us a lot about how people perceive the world, interact with one another, and go about their daily lives. Researchers gain a deeper understanding of a society's values, social norms, and shared wisdom by examining the themes, metaphors, and emotions embedded within proverbs.

Proverbs: A harmonious dialogue between humanity and nature

Cultural behavior is mirrored in man's interactions with the natural world. Interactions between ordinary people as a result of their working lives, challenges, and normal activities have practical importance since they have generalized human behaviors in life. This life philosophy is global and applicable to Vietnamese society. It provides Vietnamese generations with practical experience on how to interact with nature, family, and society. We can see how our forefathers interacted with nature in the past through proverbs. Weather proverbs arose and evolved as a result of actual findings, studying, exploiting, and reacting to nature. Humans have an insatiable urge to comprehend and enhance the environment, climate, and weather. The Vietnamese discovered their nature by either using existing natural resources for agricultural production

or encouraging human intervention in nature to boost output.

Nature is always a subject of study for those who live in agricultural societies. Nature has never been kind to humanity. Farmers are always concerned about wild jungles, oceans, marshes, irregular rain, and the sun, among other things. "The buffalo is due on the day of rice seedling transplant; my wife is due on the harvest" (*Trâu để bữa cấy, vợ để bữa mùa*). This proverb demonstrates that in antiquity, Vietnamese people were reliant on nature; nature is the deity that leads their farming endeavors, and they consequently revere nature wholeheartedly.

Farmers endeavor to learn and understand nature and progressively attempt to live in harmony with it because they live in such settings where nature has a large effect on farming and the lives of farmers. Based on their observations, they conclude that "January is the best time to plant sweet potatoes; February is ideal for growing beans; and March is ideal for growing eggplants" (*Tháng giêng là tháng trồng khoai, tháng hai trồng đậu, tháng ba trồng cà*). They do not "live upon the sky, live upon the land, live upon the cloud, and live upon the rain", for example, but they understand how to use nature to their advantage in farming and to transform the challenges of bad weather into benefits in farming production. "He who sees nature's laws will gain the most success" (*Biết sự trời mưa đời chẳng khó*). The farmer finds solace in this saying when confronted by nature and supernatural force. When people get a greater understanding of nature and technology advances, they attempt to conquer and win nature in order to make it work for them. This reveals a new phase in the evolution of production and the farmer's life.

The natural world has its own life in proverbs, which people plainly understand. Proverbs are useful in such situations because they impart information. Knowledge becomes a cultural expression when humans use proverbs to address nature. It is artistic how proverbs represent knowledge and culture. Such information is both a proverb and a scientific fact, as well as an art and a culture. As a result, proverbs impart not just information and science, but also culture and art.

Proverbs: Threads of interconnected human communication

In the past agricultural society of Vietnam, human behavior is characterized not only by the interaction between individuals and nature, but also by the complex network of relationships in the agricultural community. Farmers are faced with constant adversities imposed by the natural world, thus instilling in them a profound appreciation of the concept of a 'cohesive' community. In the non-stop battle to fight with nature, humans had to "up hill and down dale" (*Lên thác, xuống ghềnh*). They could not endure in isolation, instead relying on each other for survival: "One holding hoe, the other with a brush hook, both rely on each other to live" (*Người cầm cuốc, kẻ cầm rựa, tựa lưng vào nhau*).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the rich repository of proverbs concerning the interactions between individuals and their communities occupies a prominent place. In Vietnamese culture, maintaining harmony in the family holds a very important position. This reverence for family ties is deeply ingrained in Vietnamese society, where interactions between husband and wife, parents and children, and extended family members are cherished and celebrated. Through its rich treasure trove of proverbs and beliefs, Vietnamese culture emphasizes the essential role of unity, understanding and communication in the family. Vietnamese people wholeheartedly believe that "behind every great man, there is a great woman" (*Thuận vợ thuận chồng tát bể Đông cũng cạn*). This proverb encapsulates the transformative power of a harmonious marital relationship, implying that when a couple maintains unity and understanding, they can overcome even the most formidable challenges. The concept of mutual support and shared responsibility permeates Vietnamese culture, as reflected in the saying: "When the husband is angry, the wife should speak less," and "a soft answer turns away wrath" (*Chồng giận thì vợ bớt lời*). This proverb emphasizes the importance of restraint and thoughtful communication, allowing couples to resolve conflicts peacefully and strengthen their relationship. Besides, Vietnamese culture attaches great importance to the deep connection between parents and children. Parents, who give birth, and nurture their children, are revered as the pillars of support their children rely on. The proverb "He whose parents are alive is living in a house with a roof" (*Con có cha như nhà có nóc*) illustrates the Vietnamese view of filial piety and the long-term support that children receive from their parents. This concept extends beyond the nuclear family, which includes all relatives. A Vietnamese proverb encapsulates this sentiment, as illustrated by "Blood is thicker than water" (*Một giọt máu đào hơn ao nước lã*) and "My children are on the first place; my grandchildren are the second; next come strangers" (*Nhất con, nhì cháu, thứ sáu mới đến người dưng*). These proverbs convey a deep value placed on family ties and the duty to care for and honor one's lineage. In Vietnamese culture, the concept of family extends beyond the nuclear unit, including a large network of extended family members. This inclusive view is rooted in the belief that individuals with the same ancestors are connected by an unbreakable bond. A Vietnamese proverb reflects this sentiment, summed up by the saying: "Good fences make good neighbours" (*Rào giậu cao láng giềng tốt*). This proverb emphasizes the importance of open communication and setting boundaries to foster positive relationships in the extended family, emphasizing the values of respect, trust, and harmonious coexistence.

Proverbs in Vietnamese culture transcend the mere intellectual expressions of the natural world. They encapsulate people's collective attitudes, behaviors, and responses to common challenges. Vietnamese society has always embraced a deep sense of harmony with its surroundings. This is especially evident

among wet rice farmers, whose lives revolve around their communities. These farmers consciously cultivate relationships on different levels to create both material wealth and spiritual satisfaction. The deep connection between the Vietnamese and their community has left an indelible mark on their collective consciousness, as reflected in their neighborly relationships, religious practices, and rituals. Their memories. In the antiquity, the Vietnamese endured great suffering, but they remained steadfast in their sense of responsibility, providing shelter and mutual support in the midst of difficulties. They empathize with the pain and unhappiness of their fellow human beings, as illustrated by the proverb, "When a horse is sick, the whole stable refuses grass" (*Một con ngựa đau, cả tàu bỏ cỏ*). They face threats from natural disasters, oppressive violence and the evils of feudal society that endanger their daily lives. However, through their collective experience, everyone has learned to lift each other up in difficult times, adhering to the motto "Be together all day and night", "The good leaves protect the worn-out leaves" (*Lá lành đùm lá rách*). Our ancestors perpetuated these traditions and conveyed profound ideas in light and idyllic ways, offering heartfelt advice and depicting contrasting images of leaves - the good leaves and worn leaves take shelter together. This image represents an intimate bond between individuals, emphasizing kindness and helping each other in times of misfortune. It is this cultural value of compassion that has permeated the Vietnamese community, nurturing countless generous hearts. Through such images, important meanings in life are inspired and subtly conveyed to each soul, awakening human compassion, and promoting more effective ways of living together.

The understanding that human beings cannot exist in isolation, separate from others, or create their own isolated island, is deeply ingrained in Vietnamese culture. This conception is also reflected in an English proverb "No man is an island" [11]. The existence of individuals plays an important role in the mutual support and connection of the entire community. The relationships between individuals and their communities promote faithful coexistence, as illustrated by the proverb: "A stranger nearby is better than a far-away relative" (*Bán họ hàng xa mua láng giềng gần*). This emphasizes the value placed on close relationships and the recognition that immediate closeness and support are more valuable than distant family relationships.

Proverbs: Echoes of inner conversations unveiled

Vietnamese culture, known for its strong community values, not only emphasizes harmonious relationships in family and community, but also attaches great importance to personal growth and self-improvement. Vietnamese proverbs act as a mirror reflecting the moral lessons that individuals apply to themselves. These proverbs are the distilled wisdom of our ancestors, lessons learned from ancient times, and guidance for navigating life's challenges.

The proverb "He, who keeps company with the

wolf, will learn to howl" (*Đi với Bụt mặc áo cà sa, đi với ma mặc áo giấy*) represents the Vietnamese approach to adapting to many different circumstances, including myself. It emphasizes the innate ability of individuals to adapt to their environment and adopt appropriate behaviors. As we encounter different situations, we must learn to adapt our lifestyles and interactions accordingly. This flexibility is important, especially when transitioning from one environment to another. In Vietnam, the saying "each country has its own customs" emphasizes the need to recognize and adapt to the unique customs and practices of each locality. By understanding new objective conditions, individuals can proactively adjust their behavior, ultimately enhancing their lives. Failure to adapt to new circumstances can leave individuals feeling out of place, like a fish out of water. It emphasizes the importance of embracing change and being open to new experiences. To thrive in a developing world, individuals must be willing to let go of old habits and beliefs that no longer serve them. This adaptability enables personal growth and empowers individuals to navigate life's challenges effectively.

According to contemporary theories, the ability to adapt to new circumstances and navigate one's own inner world is considered a valuable life skill. Throughout history, our ancestors have left us invaluable lessons in behavior. The beauty of Vietnamese culture lies in its seamless blend of nobility and simplicity, good and evil, passion and indifference, and other contrasting elements. The Vietnamese show considerable flexibility in their behavior, relying on their interactions to show intelligence, agility and sensitivity. When faced with different circumstances, individuals demonstrate their adaptability by adjusting their behavior to fit the objective context. This can be expressed through proverbs: "He who lives with cripples learns to limp" (*Ở bầu thì tròn, ở ống thì dài*). Such a philosophy of life serves as a guiding principle, protecting people from feelings of loneliness and uncertainty. It empowers individuals to integrate into new environments naturally and positively.

In addition, Vietnamese proverbs serve as poignant reminders of how individuals should behave in life. Within the framework of Vietnamese culture, purity of mind and values of honesty and goodness have greater significance than accumulating wealth through dishonest means. It is thanks to these proverbs that individuals admonish themselves, asserting that "A clean fast is better than a dirty breakfast" (*Giấy rách phải giữ lấy lề*) and that "honesty is the best policy" (*Thật thà là thượng sách*). These proverbs emphasize the importance of maintaining moral integrity and avoiding sin and evil, as they contaminate the purity of one's character.

Folk knowledge imparts moral lessons, instills in individuals a sense of purposes, and guides them in their interactions with others. It directs people to noble feelings, shaping their views on love and hate. It is through the prism of social relationships that the full complexity of human nature is revealed.

Each individual is an integral part of different social connections, each with their own roles, responsibilities, and rights. These individuals act as contributing cells to the cohesive entity of society. Life itself is not simple due to the complex web of relationships that exist, and it is in this context that proverbs serve as educational lessons passed down through generations of Vietnamese.

Conclusion

When viewed through a cultural lens, proverbs encompass a society's language as well as its behavior. The behavioral aspect is concerned with interactions with nature and society, and this essence is prominently displayed in the treasure trove of Vietnamese proverbs. Proverbs, as a cultural language, bestow extraordinary words of wisdom crafted by revered artists. The cultural beauty that pervades these proverbs has ingrained itself deeply within the hearts of every Vietnamese person throughout generations.

Vietnamese people, like their counterparts in other countries, have complex relationships with nature. Nature is viewed as both a friend and a deity, and the dominant behavior is one of seeking harmony and adaptability in order to coexist with nature for survival. Family and societal behaviors have an innate proclivity for love, which stems from either familial bonds or collective coherence. Kindness and goodness are fundamental components of Vietnamese family and community behaviors. Compassion, charity, love, and gratitude are highly valued virtues in Vietnamese society.

The cultural behaviors encapsulated within proverbs provide insights into the common folk's perspectives. Spiritual values, the beauty of the soul, intellectual pursuits, and certain lifestyles were revered in ancient traditions, providing positive principles and conceptualizations for behavior. These cultural behaviors have become an integral part of community life, serving as moral reference points in Vietnamese society. Even today, we can see the profound imprint of traditional culture embedded within the personalities and daily lives of the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese culture, as transmitted through proverbs, blends seamlessly into the larger tapestry of human culture, enriching and imbuing life with enduring values.

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