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“WHAT FATWOOD DECAYS, WHAT WORD DECAYS”: TOWARDS A TANGKHUL PAREMIOLOGICAL-MINIMUM

Abstract: This paper examines the data drawn from a survey conducted in 2020 among Tangkhul diasporic students in Shillong, Meghalaya, regarding their familiarity with and use of some traditional proverbs and proverbial phrases. This is in response to the growing concern in the community regarding the cultural competence of the younger generation. Given their status as repositories of ancestral wisdom, proverbial usage in contemporary communication must have very specific modes of operation. The aim of this study is, therefore, twofold: firstly, to gauge the proverbial literacy of younger Tangkhul diasporic speakers and to try to understand the contemporary currency of Tangkhul fixed expressions among a globalised youth. The proverbial literacy of 129 college-educated urban Tangkhul youth aged between 19 and 33 years was tested using snowball sampling to determine the contemporary relevance of these proverbs among the young diaspora. While the small sample size inhibits the establishment of a paremiological minimum, the findings are useful for the understanding of cultural continuities and shifts among the Tangkhul Naga, especially given the UNESCO status of the language as endangered. The findings show that although over 50 percent of speakers have low proverbial literacy, a significant number do possess active knowledge. These insights contribute not only towards establishing a paremiological minimum for Tangkhul, but also potentially address questions of cultural influence, diasporic identities, and the ability of fixed expressions to survive even in the absence of current cultural referents.

Keywords: Tangkhul proverbs, proverbial phrases, proverbial literacy, paremiological minimum, young native speakers

1. *Introduction*

The Tangkhul is a Naga tribal ethnic group primarily settled in the Ukhrul and Kamjong Districts of Manipur, India, and in the Somra tract hills of Myanmar. They speak the Tangkhul language,¹ which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family, although its exact linguistic classification is debated (Mortensen and Miller 2013: 1). Its population, as per the 2011 Indian census of Ukhrul district, is around 183,998, settled in over 200 villages, each having its own dialect, mutually incomprehensible with Tangkhul.² Tangkhuls are generally multilingual, speaking Tangkhul, their village dialect, Manipuri, and often English and Hindi. The Tangkhul language uses the English alphabet with two additional letters (Ā and A) and is employed in official proceedings and education. Despite its use, Tangkhul is categorised as ‘endangered’ by the UNESCO WAL. In Walter Ong’s terms, Tangkhul may be considered a “residual oral” culture (2002).

Among the Tangkhuls, proverbs traditionally have served various communicative functions and can be regarded as one of the most frequently utilised oral genres in daily interactions, but there is increasing concern among the community regarding the cultural competence of the younger generation. Adopting a modern way of life has had a double impact on the community. While global modernity has been enthusiastically embraced by some native speakers, especially among the youth (rural or urban diasporic), a counter influence has been a recent call for cultural preservation as part of maintaining ethnic identity (for example, in administrative decisions at the village and state level, through the printing of collections of oral texts and writing textbooks, and on various social media platforms). Tangkhul proverbs do not reflect modern life but are rich resources for reconstructing the social and cultural history of the people. It may be argued

¹ Tangkhul, based on the Hunphun dialect, was standardised by William Pettigrew, a British missionary who played a significant role in the introduction of Christianity to the region toward the end of the 19th century. (See Pettigrew 2023).

² See <https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/858>, retrieved on 31 January 2025. For district-wise population distribution in Manipur, see data available at <https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/43013>, retrieved on 31 January 2025. For total native speakers in India, see Table C-16 data available at <https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/10191>, retrieved on 31 January 2025.

that rhetorical effectiveness and contextual convenience contribute to their dynamism and popularity as an oral genre. Moreover, Tangkhul is a tonal language, and therefore, its very orality and phonic properties add sophistication and melody to the proverbs. Given their status as ancestral wisdom within the community, proverbial usage in contemporary communications must thus have very specific modes of operation. Distinguished by their unique style and structure, Tangkhul proverbs differ from everyday language, enhancing the versatility and impact of quotidian communication. This paper reports the findings of a preliminary empirical study towards the establishment of a paremiological minimum for Tangkhul. Through this process, it investigates the level of familiarity that young Tangkhul speakers have with these old proverbs and proverbial phrases, using the notion of cultural literacy to frame the inquiry, thereby contributing to the larger understanding of the status of the language for its multilingual speakers, the role and currency of its traditional proverbs on contemporary (diasporic) living, and its risk of future endangerment.

2. Cultural Literacy and the Paremiological Minimum

Individuals within any cultural context possess a set of culture-specific words, expressions, and verbal arts that enable effective communication with native-like competence. In 1987, E. D. Hirsch coined the influential term “cultural literacy”, referring to the comprehension of shared cultural information, which is seen as crucially facilitating fluent communication within a particular community and contributing to cultural identity formation. Hirsch’s book includes an Appendix featuring a list of 5,000 items encompassing facts, phrases, dates, famous people, ideas, events, literature, science, and concepts that he deems essential for every literate American to know in order for them to be considered American at all. As he eloquently puts it, in order to “grasp the words on a page, we have to know a lot of information that isn’t set down on the page” (Hirsch 1988: 3). Hirsch asserts that cultural literacy goes beyond mere memorisation of words: it entails understanding the usage contexts and cultural nuances associated with them. Cultural competence, therefore, involves shared knowledge that has been relevant and acknowl-

edged within a community for generations. Complementing this work, Hirsch, Kett, and Trifil published *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* in 1988, which provides annotations and explanations for various cultural elements, and contains a list of proverbs as well.

More recent work in cognitive psychology also agrees with the assertion that words can acquire meaning only through cultural connotations. As Richard P Honeck notes, language comprehension is a sophisticated cognitive process that moves beyond simply grasping the meanings of words, encompassing both their core, context-free definitions and the manner in which meanings are integrated. Additionally, this process is influenced by various contributing factors such as background assumptions, extensive world knowledge, inferential reasoning, immediate context, and more (1997: 52). Heather A Hass also states that “the capacity to function effectively in a culture requires at least some minimal familiarity with the elements of the shared culture” (2008: 320). Language comprehension is a dynamic process that involves a combination of linguistic, cognitive, and contextual factors.

Proverbs are widely acknowledged as being constitutive of a significant aspect of cultural literacy, contributing to a person’s ability to navigate and engage meaningfully within their cultural milieu (Đurčo 2015: 187). The study of an individual’s proverb knowledge becomes instrumental in gauging their cultural literacy. As Wolfgang Mieder puts it, proverbs “continue to be an effective verbal device, and culturally literate persons, both native and foreign, must have a certain paremiological minimum at their disposal to participate in meaningful oral and written communication” (2015: 312). Scholars have endeavoured to establish this paremiological minimum or proverbial minimum—a fundamental set of proverbs that an average adult from a specific culture is expected to be familiar with (Đurčo 2015: 183)—for various languages. The list of 265 proverbs printed in Hirsch’s abovementioned 1988 dictionary, which are prescriptive as part of the cultural literacy expected from every literate American, is questioned by Mieder since the methodology for creating this list is not explicitly stated and it seems unlikely that Hirsch acquired his proverbs from newspapers (which he considers as arbiters of public language usage and therefore authoritative in terms of

cultural literacy) (2015: 309). Nevertheless, it is agreed that such lists, generated from various methods of sociolinguistic corpora, are essential for establishing and evaluating cultural competence, and scholars have accordingly employed diverse sampling and testing methods to arrive at what Grigorij Permjakov named “the paremiological minimum.”³

The American sociologist William Albig pioneered the use of demographic methods with proverbs in 1931, marking a significant development in the field (Mieder 2015: 299). In his approach, Albig instructed participants to write down all the proverbs they knew within a thirty-minute timeframe. The abovementioned Grigorij L'vovich Permjakov, who introduced the concept of the paremiological minimum (1973), used Russian as the target language. He presented a comprehensive list encompassing proverbs, proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, and other fixed phrases to 300 participants, subsequently analysing the data according to certain conditions. Psychologist Stanley S. Marzoff (1974) focused on American proverbs, asking participants to identify and mark the texts they were familiar with (qtd. in Mieder 2015: 297–316). Some experiments provided the initial portion of proverbs, prompting participants to complete the missing parts, although this method had its detractors due to the arbitrariness of compilation in the list. Important questions, that remain unanswered, were: How should the proverbs be chosen, and should the initial or the final part of the proverb be provided? (Čermák 2003: 15, qtd. in Ďurčo, 2015: 184). Wolfgang Mieder conducted empirical research on the English paremiological minimum in 1994, F. Čermák in 2003 on Czech, Doctor Raymond in 2005 on Gujarati proverbs, and Peter Ďurčo in 2015 (who also offered the alternative “paremiological optimum”). Ďurčo’s proposed concept refers to a set of proverbs that are both widely known by speakers and exhibit a high frequency of occurrence in text corpora. Ďurčo convincingly claims that the proverbs most commonly used in everyday speech do

³ It must, however, be noted that recently Peter Ďurčo (2015) has argued that since empirical experiments in the paremiological minimum have been made with proverbs and not other kinds of paremia, a more appropriate term to designate this would be “proverbial minimum.”

not necessarily correspond with those that appear most frequently in published texts and argues for a “correlation between the best-known proverbs by users and their high frequency in text corpora” (186, fn 133), which he refers to as the “paremiological optimum.” Other notable contributions to this field include Ďurčo’s compilation for Slovak (2002), Szpila’s study, which also focuses on Polish (2002), Vyshya’s research on Ukrainian (2008), Čermák’s work on Czech (2003), and Meterc’s investigation into Slovenian (2016), among others.⁴

The common problem that the debate around the paremiological minimum/optimum grapples with, however, is the challenge of determining what should be included in the circulated and/or compiled list and how to assess proverbial literacy. Creating a comprehensive list of proverbs for the paremiological minimum of a language is a complex task, whether from a corpus or empirical data. Equally complex is the evaluation of an individual’s cultural knowledge and the definition of the threshold of cultural literacy attainment. Developing a paremiological minimum requires consideration of the most fundamental and widely recognised proverbs within a specific cultural and linguistic context, but views on how to develop a valid and objective methodology for curating that list differ widely. The challenge arises from the diversity of proverbs, their regional variations, and the subjective nature of what may be deemed essential cultural knowledge. Similarly, assessing proverbial literacy involves gauging the ability to memorise proverbs and understanding their usage, cultural contexts, and nuanced meanings. In this sense, cultural literacy extends beyond rote memorisation to encompass a deeper comprehension of the societal, historical, and practical contexts in which proverbs are employed. The multimodality of the skills required to perform these tasks underscores the multifaceted dimensions of cultural literacy and proverbial knowledge, making

⁴ Other studies are Hungarian (Tóthné Litovkina 1992), English (Grzybek, Chłosta 1995, Fiedler 2020), Croatian (Baur, Chłosta, Grzybek 1996, Matovac, Varga 2016), Lusatian Serbians (Hose 1995), Portuguese (Reis, Baptista 2020), Spanish (Sevilla Muñoz, Díaz 1997), German (Chłosta, Grzybek, Roos 1994, Ďurčo 2006, Steyer 2012), Czech (Schindler 1993), and Polish (Szpila, 2014). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this report for drawing my attention to them. However, I have been unable to access them at the time of writing.

it a complex endeavour to develop a definitive list or ascertain a precise level of cultural literacy for individuals. The following section of the paper describes the methodology used for a pilot study as an initial step toward establishing the Tangkhul paremiological minimum in the future. It is based on the Tangkhul textual corpus, which is still far from complete. Some attempts have been made by the author of this paper to tailor the method to the particular linguistic and demographic context, keeping in mind the problems that the methodological debate briefly touched upon above seeks to address.

3. Problems in Establishing a Tangkhul Paremiological Minimum and Methodology Adopted

As noted earlier, the objective of this study is to assess the enduring popularity of these proverbs and their usage in everyday communication among young Tangkhul speakers. It is important to note that the list of fixed expressions compiled for this purpose is not asserted to be a paremiological minimum applicable to the entire Tangkhul community. Selecting proverbs that may be considered ‘commonly known proverbs’ that any Tangkhul should be familiar with is challenging. Firstly, there are no exhaustive collections and dictionaries of Tangkhul proverbs. Secondly, as Tangkhuls speak different dialects, there is a possibility that they draw from a different repository of proverbs, and pinpointing a specific expression to be considered a ‘commonly known proverb’ that a Tangkhul should know cannot be established without exhaustive documentation, which is yet to be done. There is no comprehensive dictionary or corpus of Tangkhul proverbs available. Thirdly, there is no clear demarcation of proverbs from idioms, maxims, adages, sayings, aphorisms, apophthegms, and other fixed expressions in Tangkhul culture. They are commonly referred to as *chāncham* (proverb), which is used as an umbrella term. Tangkhul paremiographers do not undertake this typology either, being content to compile various genres of fixed expressions under the term proverbs. This definitional ambiguity makes the identification and selection process for inclusion in the list even more complicated. The circulated list is ultimately based on personal judgement and experience as a native speaker along

with findings of field-work among village elders (octogenarians and nonagenarians) which showed that the selected proverbs and proverbial phrases were among the most widely recognised and used by the older generation (Ng 2024).

It is important at this point to acknowledge that native speakers’ intuitive perceptions of what constitutes a proverb may differ from definitions established within global paremiological scholarship. Therefore, in the present study, expressions that speakers identified as proverbs (*chāncham*) were included in the questionnaire, irrespective of whether they conformed to formal scholarly definitions. Although the distinction between proverbs and proverbial phrases was not explicitly presented to respondents during data collection, this report maintains a clear differentiation between the two categories. While no universally accepted definition of the proverb exists, foundational paremiological studies—such as those by Taylor (1931), Mieder (1985), and Norrick (1985)—commonly regard the complete grammatical sentence or autonomous propositional statement as one of the characteristics of the proverb. Although this criterion has considerable limitations, as Norrick (1985: 34) acknowledges, it remains a useful heuristic for distinguishing proverbs from proverbial phrases. This distinction is maintained here to delineate what Mieder terms “true proverbs” (2015: 41) from the proverbial phrases. Following the tentative typology and categorisation criteria proposed in my doctoral study, this report uses the addition of the word *kathā* (“like”) to proverbial phrases as a marker for identifying “true proverbs” in the corpus. This word cannot be added to proverbs according to the Tangkhul language structure, *kachi kathā* (which also means “like”) can be added instead (Ng 2024: 73 ff). Since the list provided to the participants contained both proverbs and proverbial phrases according to this mode of categorisation—despite being collectively identified as “proverbs” by native speakers—it is more accurate and academically appropriate to refer to the study as a pilot work towards establishing a phraseological-paremiological minimum rather than solely a paremiological minimum.⁵

⁵ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this essay for this suggestion.

For the purposes of this study, I adopted Wolfgang Mieder's widely cited definition: "A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation" (1985: 119). Although proverbial phrases may similarly exhibit figurative language and cultural specificities, they generally lack the evaluative dimension, structural autonomy, and didactic function that characterise true proverbs. Proverbs and proverbial phrases that are documented in two or more written collections of proverbs and are also present in the Phalee village dialect are included in the list. The list is far from exhaustive, however, and a proper survey would first require the establishment of a comprehensive collection, which is still in progress at the time of writing.

The participants in the study comprise native Tangkhul speakers of both genders (no individual identified as non-binary) aged between 19 and 33 years and studying in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, India. The average age of the participants is 22.2 years. The data was collected in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic using a snowball sampling method. The choice of location was based on several considerations. There are more than 200 Tangkhul villages, with inhabitants speaking a distinct dialect corresponding to the village name (Ahum 1997: 21). Ideally, data should be collected from each Tangkhul village, with participants from all age groups, educational backgrounds, and occupations. However, this was not feasible, especially during the pandemic. The next best option was to identify a single location in which individuals who speak the language from various villages reside. This was found in Shillong, Meghalaya, which has a concentration of Tangkhul students from several different villages living and studying there. Although this reduces the risk of biased sampling, it does not ensure proper or even representation of participants from every village. Moreover, the concentration of students in higher education institutions pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate studies limits the population attributes along the lines of age and social background, thereby reducing the possibility of identifying a reliable minimum.

One hundred twenty-nine participants from different parts of the Ukhrul and Kamjong districts of Manipur participated

in this study. Out of these participants, 70 are female, and 59 are male. No attempt has been made to assess and interpret the collected data based on age, socio-economic status, gender, or educational qualification, which are factors that are likely to affect proverb familiarity. The primary goal of this research was to determine whether the English-educated younger generations are still familiar with the proverbs and proverbial phrases of the older generations; therefore, the other factors were ignored for the moment in this study.

The methodology was drawn from Peter Ďurčo’s questionnaire model discussed in “Empirical Research and Paremiological Minimum” (2014). Ďurčo evaluates the level of familiarity on five scales. Following his familiarity rating structure, with slight modifications, the participants were provided with a list of thirty-six proverbs and twenty-three proverbial phrases (see Appendix) with five options to choose from according to their level of knowledge about the proverb. The first four are as follows:

- (i) Never heard it before,
- (ii) Heard it before but do not know the meaning,
- (iii) Heard it before, know the meaning but never use it, and
- (iv) Heard it before, know the meaning and use it.

Since some proverbs in the list can have variants in standard Tangkhul as well as other village dialects, a fifth column was also provided for participants to supply variants or versions. This modification allows participants to choose from the five options, thereby making it possible not only to observe the different levels of familiarity for each proverb/saying but also to identify variants and thus to serve an additional paremiographical function in the future.

The compiled list is drawn from a larger corpus of approximately 1,000 proverbs and proverbial phrases, which were curated from five scanty collections of Tangkhul proverbs: S Kanrei’s *Tangkhul Chānjam (Tangkhul Proverbs)* (1978), L. K. Sira’s *Haowui Kharar Chānsam (Proverbs)* (1991), Peter Pheirei’s *Hao Chāncham (Hao Proverbs)* (2018), Stephen Angkang’s *Ancient Sayings of Hao and Modern Proverbs* (No date), and K John’s *Awo-Ayi Ngashan (Culture, Custom, Lasem)* (No date). S

Arokianathan also lists 163 proverbs in *Tangkhul Folk Literature* (1982), and the modern edition of William Pettigrew's *Tangkhul Dictionary* (2023) includes 28 proverbs. Somi Kasomwoshi's *Hao Tangkhul Chanjam* (2022) was not published during the time of the survey. Nevertheless, his collection of proverbs is also compared and cited in this report. The lists of proverbs in Arokianathan, and Pettigrew are also cited. Notably, 43 out of the 59 items provided in the questionnaire are included in higher secondary-level Tangkhul textbooks, which also probably draw from these collections.

For the purposes of discussion in this paper, asterisk marks have been added to each proverb and proverbial phrase to indicate the number of printed volumes in which they appear, ranging from * to ***** as a shorthand. Although these marks were not included in the original questionnaire, they have been added here in the discussion to provide a visual reference regarding the frequency of their inclusion across multiple anthologies and, thus, their frequency of occurrence within the corpus. Source titles are not mentioned by name in the text for readability. This information is provided in the Appendix, which lists by name the sources in which every proverb or proverbial phrase appears.

4. Findings and Interpretation

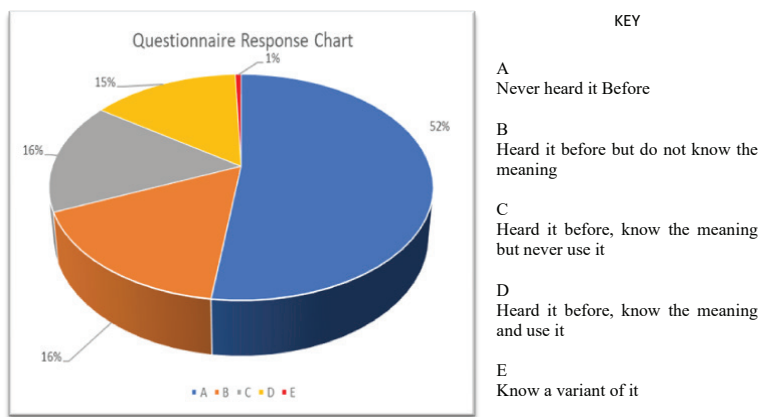


Figure 1. Visual Representation of Respondent Data

The above pie chart represents only the mean value. The findings show that, on average, 52% of the college students surveyed had never encountered these commonly used proverbs and proverbial phrases before (Fig. 1). This indicates a potential gap in exposure to traditional or common proverbs and proverbial phrases within this demographic, providing a certain degree of validation to the recent concerns being voiced within the community regarding cultural heritage preservation. Nevertheless, a not insignificant portion of students (16%) do recognise these proverbs, although they do not understand their meaning. This deficiency in the comprehension or interpretation of these fixed expressions, despite some degree of exposure, possibly points to the changes in everyday language use of bilingual speakers, in whose pragmatic use scenarios (especially in a multicultural milieu), English phrases and idioms may be more commonly employed. Another 16% of students understand the meanings of these proverbs but do not actively use them in their own language or conversations. This again suggests that while they recognise the sayings as part of the cultural heritage, they may not find them easily applicable to their daily lives. A marginally smaller but still significant portion of students (15%) are both familiar with the meanings of these proverbs and proverbial phrases and incorporate them into their own speech. The fact that at least some students do find value in these traditional sayings and manage to actively use them in everyday interactions is also significant in that they offer the potential for more in-depth study to isolate factors that keep these sayings living and current, which may then be implemented for strengthening cultural literacy in the future. Some students claim that they know variants of these proverbs, but while variations or alternative versions may exist, they are not widely recognised among this demographic.

The least known proverb is (11) *Ngawurla chungnāakha ālāngkham mashungmana***** lit. “When bamboo rats are many, they neglect to close the entrance,” although it appears in several collections. 121 participants (93.7%) have not heard this proverb before. Seven participants have heard it but do not know the meaning, six have heard it and know the meaning but never used it, and four people know the meaning and use it. The second least familiar proverb is (41) *Marekla maleka, yārekla ngale-*

*ka, yāningla nganingtāya**** lit. “Work hard, you’ll eat; show pride, you’ll bow; act arrogantly, you’ll fall.” 119 participants (92.2%) have never heard of it before. (2) *Ava thila ashāmali kachap kathā**** lit. “like weeping for her/his lover at her/his mother’s death” and (36) *Siluināo thangkha chānga, wungnao⁶ thangkha chānga**** lit. “Sometimes a calf is scrawny, sometimes *wungnao* is scrawny” has a low level of familiarity as well. 117 participants heard them for the first time; that is, only 12 participants are familiar with these expressions; only two use the latter, but no one has ever used the former one. Thus, although the least known proverb appears in half the collections (see asterisk notations as explained above), the others appear in only three collections each and is neither frequent in the corpus nor popular amongst these speakers.

The top fifteen least familiar proverbs were unknown to more than 100 participants each. Those who have heard the proverbs do not use them. (49) *Shanāle—Pharon sanglu; Sāng-nāle—Katat haolu****** lit. “It’s too short—Join more; It’s too long—Cut off” has the highest number of users among the least familiar proverbs, with fifteen participants. The proverb (54) *Chihānla ngamāna**** lit. “Hopeful expectation becomes a vain expectation” has ten users, whereas the remaining least familiar proverbs have fewer than ten users. Cultural relevance may not be a factor for this unfamiliarity, since none of them refer to specific cultural concepts or practices that may have grown obsolete with changing lifestyles. This data indicates that these traditional fixed expressions may be in immediate danger of extinction, but this apprehension would need to be correlated with data from a larger and different demographic to establish this further.

The most commonly used expression is the proverbial phrase (6) *Hangkornāli tarā heikharor kathā***** lit. “like pouring water over yam leaves”, with 104 participants (80.6%) using it. Only five participants claim that they have never heard it before. Two participants say they have heard it before but do not know the meaning, and sixteen have heard it and know the meaning

⁶ *Wungnao* is a village chief or clan chief. This proverb talks about resilience and eventual prosperity. Just as a weak calf matures into a powerful bull, a nobleman may face poverty but is destined to regain wealth and status.

but never use it. Two participants claim to know a variant of it but do not supply the variant. This proverbial phrase has a similar meaning to the English idiom “water off a duck’s back”. The second most used are the proverbial phrases (25) *Pawung mashuithei kahon kathā****** lit. “like an owl waiting for *mashuithei*”⁷ and the proverb (12) *Khamathā sāsi chila favā on****** lit. “Mending to make it better turns into a dog”, with 74 participants claiming to use each. The other 23 participants have heard and know the meaning but never used the phrase (25) *Pawung mashuithei kahon kathā*, the other eight participants have heard it but do not know the meaning, and 24 participants have never heard it before. 33 participants have heard proverb (12) *Khamathā sāsi chila favā on* and know the meaning but never use it, and the other ten participants have heard it before but do not know the meaning. This proverb has a similar meaning to the Greek proverb “Excess mars perfection”. Yam leaves, owls, and dogs are not specific to any particular lifestyle or culture, although a negative attitude towards some kinds of dogs may be a characteristic of Tangkhul (Ng 2024). Furthermore, such fixed expressions might have gained popularity precisely because they are versatile and applicable to a wide range of contemporary life situations.

The existing literature on proverb literacy acknowledges the generational factor in proverb recognition and usage. As Raymond puts it, “[w]ithin a synchronic time frame, different generations have different proverb “registers” just as they admit different language “registers”” (2005: 52). Malmgren also points out that “since cultural practices change over time, the possible proverbs also change” (2007: 232). The proverbs in the list might have lost their popularity among college students as they have little significance in their daily lives. The proverbs and proverbial phrases that were on the list were from the collections of proverbs collected a few decades ago and were not widely circulated. Therefore, those proverbs and the proverbial phrases

⁷ The *mashuithei* (needlewood fruit) hardens as it ripens, rendering it inedible for owls that wait in vain. This proverbial expression describes a situation where someone waits endlessly for something unlikely to occur. Its meaning is comparable to the theme of futile waiting depicted in Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*.

that have a cultural allusion to that era or before might have lost their currency among the younger generation.

However, this does not address the question of non-recognition of proverbs included in the school curriculum. Tangkhul is taught as one of the third-language subjects in the Manipur Board of Secondary Education curriculum up to Class VIII. From Class IX to Class XII, it is offered as an optional subject for students who choose not to study Alternative English. Some of the proverbs and proverbial phrases (43 of them) in the questionnaire are also in the syllabus, but surprisingly, some have a low familiarity level among the participants. (57) *Kathishila khāngkakhei āzang kahai kathā****** lit. “Send to report someone’s dead; joins in festivities” has a very low level of familiarity. 104 participants (80.6%) said they had never heard it before. Similarly, (52) *Pheipāng yā, khamor yā; pheipāng theng, khamor theng**** lit. “Wet limbs, wet mouth; dry limbs, dry mouth” also has a low familiarity among respondents. 61 participants, i.e. 47.2 %, encountered it for the first time in the questionnaire. Similarly, (48) *Zātrom makaphung zātpar shimei***** lit. “One who doesn’t bring tiffin moves his hand faster” also has a low familiarity. 44.6% of the respondents claim that they have never heard of it before, and only eleven participants have used it.

As noted above, the proverbial phrase (6) *Hangkornāli tarq heikharor kathā* ***** lit. “like pouring water over yam leaves” is the most familiar and used of the listed expressions. (23) *Parki kachina shup, shupki kachina par******, lit. “Those aiming for a handful get a pinch, and those aiming for a pinch get a handful” (27) *Rārāli har kachiphun kathā****** lit. “like sending chicken through a civet cat”, (50) *Faphei mei kachui kathā****** lit. “like a dog’s feet on fire”, (51) *Nāyong shimsak kathā* ***** lit. “like the way monkeys build a house” (probably a truncated version of *Nāyong shimsak zurli ngathāna* lit. “Monkey’s house gets scattered in rainy season”) and (4) *Fāna paila harna khangayā kathā****** lit. “like a dog defecates and a hen scratches it” have a high level of familiarity and a higher level of usage than the other proverbs and proverbial phrases. The data indicates that respondents demonstrate a greater familiarity with proverbial phrases compared to proverbs, possibly because they are quicker

and more elastic and thus handier to incorporate within everyday discourse.

Unsurprisingly, proverbs and proverbial phrases that contain archaic words have lower familiarity levels. (16) *Kh̄arei zatla kh̄arāna kakapā****** (105/81.39%)⁸ lit. “like small cats [hyena, leopard etc.] that mimic the roar of big cats when there’s a rumour of them nearby”, (2) *Āva thila ashāmali chapkazat kathā**** (117/ 90.69%) lit. “like weeping for her/his lover at her/his mother’s death”, (57) *Kathishila khāngkakhei āzangkahai kathā****** (104/80.62%) lit. “Send to report someone’s dead; joins in festivities” contain some archaic words like *kakapā* (to cry), *ashāma* (lover), *kathikashi* (to send the news of death), and *khāngkakhei* (merrymaking). Likewise, proverbs and proverbial phrases that reference unknown sources also tend to have low familiarity. For instance, in the proverb (31) *Shapeilāna Ramshilāli hāngkhamachin*****, lit. “like Shapeilā admonishes Ramshilā”, the proper names *Shapeilā* and *Ramshilā* have unclear sources of origin. They are recognised as the names of two immoral women but have no clear references in folk narratives.

5. Towards a Tangkhul Paremiological Optimum

This survey faces several challenges, some of which have been outlined above but may be more fully discussed here. Firstly, there is a lack of prior research on the Tangkhul proverbs, leading to the compilation of a somewhat ‘unscientific’ list based on limited proverb collections presumed to represent the ‘most commonly used proverbs and proverbial phrases’ of the older generation. Secondly, the respondents are exclusively college students. For a more comprehensive understanding, a broader demographic study considering age, education, and gender across the entire Tangkhul population would be more insightful.

⁸ Never heard it before.

(16) Describes individuals who commit wrongdoing under the name of a powerful person, causing blame to fall on the influential figure.

(2) Refers to a person acting inappropriately or failing to adapt to a given situation.

(57) Denotes someone unreliable in serious matters.

(31) Highlights the hypocrisy of an immoral individual advising another immoral person.

Thirdly, this model does not make clear which level should be used as a standard level to categorise an individual as proverbially literate.

Despite its limitations, however, this study clearly shows that more than half of the proverbs in the questionnaire cannot be called the most commonly known proverbs and proverbial phrases, as they have never been heard by more than half of the participants. If currency is used as a prerequisite to proverbiality, most of the fixed expressions in the list cannot be called proverbial because they are not familiar enough today to meet the 'currency' criterion necessary to characterise them as proverbs in the first place. The level of proverb usage is also surprisingly low among the young Tangkhul speakers. This indicates that the students have low paremiological literacy and that these proverbs will probably soon fall out of use and only exist in written collections. So far, there are no proverb dictionaries in the language, let alone in the many dialects that constitute the Tangkhul identity, and some of the collections of existing proverbs do not provide their meaning and usage; therefore, some of the proverbs will arguably soon be out of currency.

It is observed that proverbs included in the school curriculum tend to be more familiar to students. Nevertheless, some proverbs taught in school have low familiarity, possibly due to the fact that not all students may have received their secondary education from the Manipur State Board. Students coming from one of the centralised national boards of Indian education would not have encountered these textbooks, while still growing up in the state of Manipur. Unfortunately, in this present survey, without information on students' educational histories, it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion from the data collected. Extensions of this study will seek to remedy this gap and be attentive to not only socio-economic background, age, and gender but also education.

This study also revealed that it would be more beneficial if participants were given the option to write down the proverbs they know beyond those listed in the questionnaire. This approach could give clearer information on the proverbial knowledge of the young Tangkhul speakers. Additionally, there is uncertainty regarding which of the four rating scales should be

regarded as the standard for measuring familiarity levels and determining whether the speaker is paremiologically literate.

The findings highlight varying levels of familiarity and usage of commonly used proverbs and proverbial phrases among college students, with a majority having little to no exposure to them. This could reflect shifting cultural norms or a lack of emphasis on traditional wisdom in modern education. In short, the popularity of these proverbs and proverbial phrases has greatly declined among the constantly connected modern youth.

The Tangkhul community, which has only recently transitioned to a written culture, requires more time and the contributions of individuals and organisations to study its own history, culture, and material practices, that are constitutive of community identity. Consequently, establishing a paremiological optimum—representing the ideal corpus widely recognised by the speakers and exhibiting a high frequency of occurrence in text corpora—is particularly complex. However, while the threat of obsolescence remains present, efforts are also underway to preserve, record, document, and in some cases revive the cultural heritage. While studies such as the present one, which tries to develop a modality for arriving at the usage frequency of fixed expressions within written corpora, face significant challenges, they also prepare the field for further inquiry. Thus, a preliminary exploratory investigation into the paremiological minimum, focusing on the core set of proverbs and proverbial phrases recognised and employed by specific demographic groups, may prove valuable. This essay thus tries to show how such limited work may nevertheless lay the groundwork for the eventual development of a standardised set of Tangkhul proverbs, which would serve as a critical resource for fostering culturally informed, effective, and pleasurable communication within the community. Furthermore, this standardised corpus could ultimately facilitate the establishment of a paremiological optimum, thereby contributing to the preservation and promotion of the Tangkhul linguistic and cultural heritage.

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Appendix

1. *Porhumna ngalei zai, kaphung mintā akha khi zāsito. Khayāmli ngayili yongsanglaka khi mangsito kachi* (Sira, Kanrei, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “During landslide, the toad says, “What shall I eat?”, while jumping into a pond it says, “What shall I drink?””
2. *Āvā thila ashāmali kachap kathā* (Kanrei, Sira, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Like weeping for her/his lover at her/his mother’s death”
3. *Fāna maloshoklaka zāsangluishitta* (John, Angkang, Kasomwoshi)
lit. “Dog vomits and eats it again”
4. *Fāna paila harna khangayā kathā* (Sira, Kanrei, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Like dog defecates and chicken scratches it”
5. *Fāna sāchao shingkhur rikkh kakahao kathā* (Kanrei, Sira, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Like a dog yearning to eat *sāchao* as big as *shingkhur*⁹”
6. *Hangkornāli tara heikharor kathā* (Sira, Arokianathan, Pheirei, Kasomwoshi, Angkang) [Textbook]
lit. “Like pouring water over yam leaves”
7. *Hana hannui shaiphāmei, tuiva ārartui shimei* (Sira, John, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi, Angkang)
lit. “Young greens are tastier; words of the elders are sweeter”
8. *Harvā eina rarā lā khangnui kathā* (Sira, Kanrei, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Like rooster and civet cats singing”
9. *Hokna ot murmur sāla fāna ina sāya kachi* (Angkang, Sira, John, Pheirei, Arokianathan, Kanrei, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Pig did the hard work, dog says, “I did it””
10. *Hongāna hongā tung, kaopona kaopo tung* (Sira, Angkang, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]

⁹ *Sāchao* is a traditional snack made of glutinous rice, perilla seeds, chilli and salt. *Shingkhur* is a mortar for pounding paddy. It means wishing for more than what one is capable of achieving.

- lit. *Hongā* produces *hongā*, *kaopo* produces *kaopo*¹⁰
11. *Ngawurla chungnāakha alāngkham mashungmana* (Pheirei, Sira, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “When bamboo rats are many, they neglect to close the entrance”
 12. *Kamathā sāsichila fāvā on* (Kanrei, Sira, John, Arokianathan, Angkang, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Mending to make it better turns into a dog”
 13. *Kashong meirong khāmongli zokkakhui kathā* (Kanrei, Arokianathan, Pheirei, Kasomwoshi) [textbook]
lit. “Like getting into trouble at the threshold”
 14. *Huirea chithang thāk, thākra chithang hui* (Sira, Kasomwoshi, Kanrei, Pettigrew)
lit. “Early when anticipated to be late; late when anticipated to be early”
 15. *Khamachinali kachina, sotkhamasaowali kaso* (Kanrei, Sira, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi, Angkang, Pheirei) [Textbook]
lit. “Detests the adviser, applauds the flatterer”
 16. *Khareī zatla kharāna kakapā kathā* (Kanrei, Sira, Arokianathan, Angkang, Pheirei, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “like small cats [hyena, leopard etc.] that mimic the roar of big cats when there’s a rumour of them nearby”
 17. *Maremrazai tara kakhon makazang kathā* (Kanrei, Sira, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Like *Maremrazai*¹¹ not taking part in the construction of a well”
 18. *Masi maphanla thingnā manganukmana* (John, Arokianathan, Pheirei, Kasomwoshi)
lit. “No leaves quiver without wind”
 19. *Mi kathi, kashong kaphung ngalang machingmana* (Sira, John, Kasomwoshi)
lit. “There’s no schedule for death and for getting involved in crime”
 20. *Rachangle—Thei nguishailu; Ritle—Ngalung khāngsanglu* Kanrei, Sira, Pheirei, Kasomwoshi, Arokianathan, John, Angkang, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “(I’m) thirsty— Eat roasted nuts. It’s heavy— Add rocks”

¹⁰ *Hongā* and *kaopo* are varieties of the same plant species, *lagenaria siceraria*. They have different sizes and shapes. It is similar to the English proverb “You can’t get figs from thistles.”

¹¹ a type of bird (unidentified). This phrase originates from a Tangkhul folktale in which the bird *Maremrazai* does not participate in the communal well-boring activity. Consequently, an unsociable individual is metaphorically referred to as *Maremrazai*.

21. *Ngalengakha shilengthā, ngayurakha ngawurthā, ngayangakha ngayangthā* (Kanrei, Sira, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Like a colony of rock bees when united, like a mischief of bamboo rats when together, like a sieve when sieved”
22. *Seikahomali shaoki kachili seikahomana ākhavāli kashao kathā* (Sira, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew)
“Like the cow-keeper who was going to be punished by the cattle owner, and who punishes the owner instead” (trans. Pettigrew)
23. *Parki kachina shup, shupki kachina par* (Kanrei, Sira, Arokianathan, Pheirei, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Those aiming for a handful get a pinch, and those aiming for a pinch get a handful”
24. *Phayomakha shātyoma, chipata ngapata* (Kanrei, Sira, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Oppressing leads to misfortune, insulting results in falling short”
25. *Pawung mashuithei kahon kathā* (Angkang, John, Arokianathan, Sira, Kanrei, Pheirei, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Like an owl waiting for *mashuithei*”
26. *Rāmshi khumshili machinalu, yorlāshili machinalu* (Angkang, Sira, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Don’t despise old huts and old *khum*; don’t despise *yorlā*¹²”
27. *Rārāli har kachiphun kathā* (Kanrei, Sira Pheirei, Pheirei, Arogianathan, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Like sending chicken through a civet cat”
28. *Rārēi mamakeimana, wungnao khayum tui mamatuimana* (John, Angang, Pheirei)
lit. “Python doesn’t bite, *wungnao* doesn’t insult others”
29. *Sāna sāchonli thi, mina tuimatuili thi* (John, Pheirei, Angkang, Kanrei, Kasomwoshi)
lit. “Animals are killed by their spoors and men by their words”
30. *Sampā kachat kathā* (Sira, Kanrei, Kasomwoshi)
lit. “Like the snapping of a strand of hair”
31. *Shapeilāna Ramshilāli hāngkhamachin kathā* (Sira, Pheirei, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Like Shapeilā admonishes Ramshilā”

¹² *Khum* is a traditional rain shield crafted from bamboo and himalayan screw pine. *Yorlā* is a married woman.

32. *Zingsho philāvali āyai hola āmaili shireokatā kathā* (Sira, Kanrei, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Like *zingsho philavā* rolling down a slope for calling her *āchon*”¹³
33. *Shiwok khamei khamayut kathā* (Sira, Kanrei, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Like grabbing a rat’s tail”
34. *Siluili fana shalaka ākhamei makakhayit kathā* (Sira Kanrei, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Like a buffalo not wagging its tail at the dog’s barking”
35. *Fakapai thingtung kāula āzingshong khaishang ngayapa* (Pheirei, Angang, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “One who farts climbs up a tree, but those who sit beneath hit each other’s thigh”
36. *Siluinao thangkha chānga, wungnao thangkha chānga* (Kanrei, Sira, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Sometimes a calf is scrawny, sometimes *wungnao* is scrawny”
37. *Thari phur shāra* (John, Kasomwoshi, Angkang)
lit. “One shan’t remove boundary stones”
38. *Tharik varhāwui naokhanganao kathā* (Kanrei, Sira, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew)
lit. “Like a khalij and koklass pheasants rearing their youngs”
39. *Thila arakui mapār* (Angkang, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi, John)
lit. “Though one dies, one’s bone doesn’t decay”
40. *Thing mashoda mariklo, tui mashoda matuihaipaishina* (John, Angkang)
lit. “Don’t place the firewood upside down, lest you’ll speak upside down”
41. *Marekla maleka, yārekla ngaleka, yāningla nganingtāya* (Sira, Kanrei, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Work hard, you’ll eat; show pride, you’ll bow; act arrogantly, you’ll fall.”
42. *Thora chithang thai, thaira chithang thoi* (Kanrei, Sira, Kasomwoshi, Arokianathan, Pettigrew) [Textbook]

¹³ The term *zingsho philavā* literally translates to “princess of the east,” while *āchon* denotes “elder sister” and serves as a title specifically reserved for the eldest daughter of a clan or village chief, reflecting her elevated status within the community. Her exaggerated act of rolling down a slope symbolises childish tantrums. The proverb characterises individuals who are difficult to please or perpetually complain despite their privilege. It also refers to those who, inflated by excessive praise, ultimately face downfall.

- lit. “Hungry, when expected to be full; full, when expected to be hungry”
43. *Tui chi lāna, lā chi tuina* (John, Pheirei, Kasomwoshi)
lit. “Word is song; song is word”
44. *Tuirei hāt mirei thi; tuinao hāt minao thi* (Pheirei, John, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “When a big promise is broken, an important person dies; when a small promise is broken, a less important person dies”
45. *Vāhongnao kashāng hanremhan katim sāngmei* (Kanrei, Sira, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Buckwheat flourishes longer than a poor man’s wealth”
46. *Zaimukna machārongli kapalaka “Meitei leiwuk theitāya” kachi kathā* (Sira, Pheirei, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Quail perches on a fern and says, ‘I can see the Imphal valley’”
47. *Zātham/hampai kaiakha fana manya* (Kanrei, Sira, Angkang, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Dog smiles when the earthen pot breaks”
48. *Zātrom makaphungana zātpar shimei* (John, Arokianathan, Angkang, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “One who doesn’t bring tiffin moves his hand faster”
49. *Shanāle—Pharon sanglu; Sāngnāle—Katat haolu* (Sira, Kanrei, Angkang, Kasomwoshi, Arokianathan)
lit. “It’s too short—Join more; It’s too long—Cut off”
50. *Faphei mei kachui kathā* (Sira, Kanrei, Kasomwoshi, Arokianathan, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Like a dog’s feet on fire”
51. *Nāyong shimsak kathā* (Sira, Kanrei, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Like the way monkeys build a house”
52. *Pheipāng yā khamor yā; pheipāng theng khamor theng* (Sira, Kanrei, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Wet limbs, wet mouth; dry limbs, dry mouth”
53. *Malum thāda chāmkathi* (Sira, Pheirei, Kanrei, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “rush to death like a moth”
54. *Chihānla ngamāna* (Sira, pheirei, Kasomwoshi)
lit. “Hopeful expectation becomes a vain expectation”
55. *Ningaishida matheimila nao vaikhui* (Angkang, John, Sira, Kanrei, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Lying down out of courtesy gets pregnant”

56. *Fa khañāli pai kakā kathā* (Kanrei, Sira, Pheirei, Arokianathan, Kasomwoshi) [Textbook]
lit. “Like a dog with poop on its ear”
57. *Kathishila khāngkakhei āzangkahai kathā* (Sira, Kanrei, Angkang, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Send to report someone’s dead; joins in festivities”
58. *Mafathingli paishāra mangareimana* (Kanrei, Sira, Kasomwoshi, Angkang) [Textbook]
lit. “No *paishāra*¹⁴ climbs on *mafathing*”
59. *Paoyi rakhanshai kathā* (Kanrei, Kasomwoshi, Pettigrew) [Textbook]
lit. “Like eating wine dregs at Paoyi¹⁵”

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¹⁴ *Paishāra* is unidentified and *mafathing* is *Phoebe hainesiana*, the state tree of Manipur. The message draws on naturalistic logic: just as a creeper offers no benefit to a mighty tree, a lower-class spouse is considered of little value to their partner and family.

¹⁵ A village now called Pe. It means claiming to know something despite actually being unaware.

