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A semiotic comparison of performance culture in italian and japanese proverbs

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Abstract

This article explores the role of popular proverbs in the cultural transmission of performance-oriented values, through a comparative semiotic analysis of Italian and Japanese contexts. Drawing on cultural semiotics and critical theory, the study examines how proverbial discourse contributes to the formation of subjectivities aligned with the imperatives of sacrifice and conformity. In Italy, proverbs construct a moral economy of labor centered on merit, guilt, and civic duty. In Japan, they promote discretion, discipline, and social harmony. The analysis integrates selected qualitative interviews, highlighting how these cultural logics are internalized and reproduced in everyday speech. The findings suggest that proverbs function as silent pedagogies, shaping the conditions of subjectivation and legitimizing dominant labor ideologies. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications for labor policy and the need to deconstruct these cultural devices in order to foster alternative models of subjectivity and well-being.

Keywords

performance culture; proverbs; semiotic analysis; subjectivity; labor ideology; Italy; Japan; conformity; sacrifice; cultural transmission; implicit culture; discourse and power

Introduction

Work occupies a central position in popular culture, not only as an economic activity, but as a symbolic foundation of individual and collective identity. In many societies, it has historically been associated with moral, religious and civic values, becoming a criterion of social legitimacy and an indicator of personal dignity. In Italy, this centrality is reflected in a long tradition of popular sayings, maxims, quotations and rhetorical formulas that celebrate work as a duty, a virtue and a destiny. Expressions such as “Work ennobles man”, “Those who do not work do not eat” or “Those who are ashamed of working should be ashamed of eating” are not mere statements, but condensations of a shared ethos that attributes a salvific, educational and identity-forming value to work.

In this context, the proverb takes the form of implicit knowledge, a device for cultural transmission that acts deeply in the formation of subjectivity. It does not merely describe the world, but prescribes it, guiding behaviour, expectations and moral judgements. Through its aphoristic structure and apparent obviousness, the proverb naturalises social norms and models of life, making them familiar, legitimate and desirable. Its strength lies not in demonstration but in evidence: “it has always been said”, “it has always been so”. In this way, proverbs contribute to the construction of a common sense which, although not explicitly normative, exercises a powerful regulatory function.

In Italy, this function manifests itself in a widespread rhetoric that associates work with sacrifice, discipline and individual responsibility. In Japan, on the other hand, popular proverbs, although less numerous and less explicitly focused on work, convey an ethos of conformity and social harmony, in which the individual is called upon not to stand out, not to disturb the collective balance, not to “stick out”. The Japanese proverb “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down” clearly expresses this logic of restraint and adaptation, which translates into a form of silent internalisation of social expectations.

The aim of this article is to explore, through a comparative semiotic analysis, the role of popular proverbs in the transmission and internalisation of the culture of performance. In particular, it aims to show how these statements contribute to the formation of different but converging performance subjectivities in different cultural contexts. The analysis will focus on Italian and Japanese proverbs, integrating, where necessary, the voices of some interviewees who, in their speeches, unconsciously reflect the cultural models conveyed by these sayings.

Barthes and Everyday Myths

In the context of cultural semiotics, the proverb can be understood as a “myth” in the *Barthesian sense*: a form of speech that naturalizes ideology by presenting it as common sense. According to Roland Barthes, myths are not lies, but rather depoliticized speech—forms of language that

conceal their constructed nature and appear as self-evident truths. In this light, proverbs function as mythopoietic devices: they transform historically and socially contingent values into timeless wisdom.

The ideology of performance—central to contemporary capitalist societies—finds in proverbs a powerful vehicle of transmission. Sayings such as “Work ennobles man” or “He who does not work should not eat” do not merely describe a moral order; they produce it. They encode the imperative of productivity, the moralization of labor, and the stigmatization of idleness into compact, memorable formulas. These expressions circulate in everyday discourse, shaping subjectivities and reinforcing the legitimacy of the performance-based social order.

In Italy, this mythic structure is particularly evident in the valorization of sacrifice and effort. The worker is not only expected to be productive but also to suffer, to endure, to “earn” rest and dignity through labor. The proverb becomes a tool of interpellation: it hails the subject as a worker, as someone whose value is measured by their capacity to perform, to conform, and to endure. In this sense, the proverb is not neutral folklore—it is a cultural technology that participates in the reproduction of hegemonic norms.

In Japan, the mythic function of proverbs operates differently but with similar effects. The saying “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down” encapsulates a collective ethos that discourages deviation and promotes conformity. Here, the ideology of performance is not centered on individual sacrifice, but on social harmony and invisibility. The subject is not called to excel, but to adapt, to disappear into the group, to avoid standing out. This too is a form of myth: it presents conformity as natural, desirable, and morally superior.

Thus, in both contexts, proverbs act as mythological condensations of the performance imperative. They do not merely reflect cultural values—they produce them, circulate them, and inscribe them into the fabric of everyday life. Through their repetition, they shape the way individuals understand themselves, their work, and their place in society. They are, in Barthes’ terms, “speech stolen and restored”—language that has been emptied of history and filled with ideology.

The culture of performance does not spread through language alone. It is institutionalised in the concrete devices through which the young enter work. In Italy, school-to-work pathways, internships and apprenticeships often function as rites of passage that familiarise students with unpaid or underpaid labour, fragmented schedules and the duty to adapt. Alternanza scuola-lavoro has exposed even minors to risk, with widely reported injuries and deaths; internships tied to university credits routinely displace wages with “experience,” and on-call or seasonal contracts push responsibility and uncertainty onto individuals already short on bargaining power. Public debates frequently oscillate between the trope “young people don’t want to work” and the

counter-evidence of offers at sub-living rates, irregular hours and unpaid trials—an oscillation that itself becomes pedagogical, teaching that failure to comply is a personal flaw rather than a structural issue.

Japan shows a different, equally formative path. Early full-time placement, seniority logics and the prestige of joining a reputable firm create strong incentives to enter and align quickly; by contrast, the figures of freeter, NEET, parasite single, or the more tragic hikikomori and karoshi, mark the outer edges of conformity. These trajectories dramatise what happens when alignment falters: marginality, shame, social withdrawal or collapse. Even where a shift toward merit-pay appears, it tends to intensify rather than relax performance demands. Across both countries, the lesson is similar: institutions do not merely measure performance; they produce it by organising entry routes, redefining time, shifting risks and internalising expectations at the level of the body and the schedule (Marcuse, 1963; Han, 2012; Beck, 1991; Chicchi & Simone, 2019, 2022).

Performance culture does not operate only through language and everyday norms; it is reinforced (and sometimes contradicted) by welfare arrangements and labor-market institutions. In Italy, early entry into the world of work is increasingly mediated by institutional devices that normalize unpaid or underpaid labor: mandatory school–work programs, widespread internships required for academic credits, and long periods of traineeships used as informal screening before paid employment. These experiences are framed as "training" and "investment in the CV," but they also accustom young people to the idea that work can be performed without adequate remuneration, and that sacrifice is a prerequisite for legitimacy. In contexts where minimum-wage protections are absent, this can amplify the moralization of endurance and make exploitation easier to justify in everyday discourse. (EU-OSHA, 2021)

In Japan, the institutional landscape looks different. The work model historically relies less on state-centered redistribution and more on the protective capacity of the organization. Social security is strongly linked to employment status, and large corporations have traditionally provided a degree of stability that substitutes for robust public welfare. Yet this protection is uneven: only a portion of the workforce—especially those in large firms—fully benefits from the "three jewels" often associated with Japanese employment (lifetime employment, seniority-based wages, and company-linked union structures). For workers in smaller firms, and especially for those in non-regular jobs, protection weakens significantly. (Kambayashi & Takao, 2012)

This dual structure has two important implications for performance subjectivity. First, it produces a sharp symbolic boundary between "real work" and peripheral work. Part-time labor (arubaito) is widespread among students and young people, but it is not always recognized as a full social identity. Second, it places intense pressure on young adults to secure stable entry into the "right" type of organization—often before graduation—because the consequences of remaining outside

that channel are not only economic, but also relational and moral. In short: the welfare arrangement helps transform employment into a gatekeeping mechanism for dignity and belonging. (Brinton, 2010)

A further contrast concerns how poverty and invisibility are managed. Japan is frequently imagined as uniformly affluent, but analyses of social policy describe a relatively moderate welfare state, with limited social spending as a share of GDP and restrictive eligibility requirements that consider family income, not only individual need. This can discourage claims-making and contribute to the social invisibility of poverty. Homelessness, for example, may be present but less visible, partly because cultural norms discourage standing out and encourage retreat into less frequented spaces. In this context, vulnerability is not simply an economic condition: it becomes a problem of exposure, shame, and the management of appearance. (Benedict, 1946)

In Italy, the moral economy takes a different form. Young people are often expected—explicitly or implicitly—to endure long periods of precariousness, low pay, and unstable contracts, while public debate oscillates between accusing them of not wanting to "make sacrifices" and denouncing the structural conditions that make work unsustainable. This public polarization is not marginal to performance culture: it is one of its engines. It produces a constant symbolic struggle over who deserves recognition—those who accept any conditions, or those who refuse them in the name of dignity. In that struggle, the figure of the "lazy young person" becomes a disciplinary stereotype, while the figure of the "exploited worker" becomes a counter-narrative seeking to de-naturalize sacrifice. (Beck, 1991; Ehrenberg, 2010)

From a comparative perspective, these differences show that welfare and labor institutions are not only technical arrangements: they stabilize particular moral vocabularies. Where protection is weak, sacrifice becomes moralized and normalized; where protection is uneven and strongly tied to organizational membership, conformity and early alignment become central. In both cases, institutional design and cultural semiotics reinforce each other, shaping what kinds of work are considered legitimate, what kinds of rest are allowed, and which deviations become stigmatized.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative semiotic analysis of proverbs from Italy and Japan, focusing on how these cultural artifacts encode and transmit the ideology of performance. The proverb is

treated not merely as linguistic folklore, but as a semiotic device that condenses and circulates cultural values, shaping subjectivities and legitimizing social norms.

The selection criteria for the corpus of proverbs are thematic: only those that explicitly or implicitly address labor, effort, success, and conformity are included. In the Italian context, this includes sayings such as “Chi non lavora non mangia” (“He who does not work should not eat”), “Il lavoro nobilita l’uomo” (“Work ennobles man”), and “Chi si vergogna di lavorare, abbia vergogna di mangiare” (“He who is ashamed to work should be ashamed to eat”). These expressions articulate an ethos of sacrifice, merit, and moral obligation. In the Japanese context, proverbs such as “出る杭は
打たれる” (“The nail that sticks out gets hammered down”) and “朝起きは三文の徳’ (“He who wakes early gains three mon”) reflect an ethos of conformity, discipline, and social harmony.

The semiotic analysis is complemented by qualitative data drawn from interviews conducted with young adults in both countries. However, only those interviews in which participants explicitly cite proverbs or unconsciously reproduce their logic in speech are considered.

Interviews are not used to generalize or quantify attitudes, but to illustrate how proverbial logic permeates everyday discourse and contributes to the formation of performance-oriented subjectivities. The integration of semiotic and qualitative methods allows for a nuanced understanding of how cultural narratives shape individual experiences and social expectations in distinct but comparable ways. Accordingly, the interviews are not intended to produce sociologically representative accounts, but to offer contextualized insights into how such symbolic grammars may resonate with individual narratives of work and obligation. The analytical integration between proverb analysis and interview material remains interpretive rather than systematic, reflecting the exploratory nature of the study and its focus on meaning-making processes rather than causal explanation.

The selection of proverbs does not aim at exhaustiveness, but at identifying recurrent and culturally salient symbolic patterns, privileging well-established and widely circulated sayings over marginal or context-specific expressions.

Results

The Ethos of Sacrifice (Italy)

In the Italian cultural context, the ideology of performance is deeply intertwined with a moralized vision of labor, articulated through a dense network of proverbs that glorify effort, discipline, and self-denial. These sayings do not merely reflect a work ethic—they construct it, prescribing a model of subjectivity in which value is earned through suffering and productivity.

Proverbs such as “Chi non lavora non mangia” (“He who does not work should not eat”), “Il lavoro nobilita l’uomo” (“Work ennobles man”), and “Chi si vergogna di lavorare, abbia vergogna di mangiare” (“He who is ashamed to work should be ashamed to eat”) encapsulate a worldview in which labor is not only necessary for survival but also for moral legitimacy. In this framework, rest is not a right but a reward, and only those who have worked hard enough are deemed worthy of it. As one popular saying puts it: “Si aspira ad avere un lavoro, per avere il diritto di riposarsi” (“One aspires to have a job in order to earn the right to rest”).

This ethos of sacrifice is reinforced by a broader cultural narrative that associates idleness with vice and degradation. Expressions like “L’ozio avvilisce ed il lavoro nobilita” (“Idleness debases and work ennobles”) and “Chi non travaglia muor nella paglia” (“He who does not work dies in the straw”) construct a binary opposition between the virtuous worker and the morally suspect idle subject. The figure of the non-working individual is not only economically marginal but symbolically excluded from the community of the worthy.

The guilt associated with rest or inactivity is not merely psychological—it is cultural, embedded in a system of values transmitted through generations.

Moreover, the Italian proverb “Chi lavora fa la gobba, e chi ruba fa la robba” (“Those who work become hunchbacked, those who steal get rich”) introduces a cynical counterpoint, acknowledging the exploitative nature of the system while still reinforcing the moral imperative to work. Even in critique, the logic of sacrifice persists.

In sum, the Italian ethos of sacrifice constructs a subject who is expected to endure, to strive, and to suffer in order to be recognized. The proverb functions here as a disciplinary tool, shaping not only behavior but also desire, guilt, and self-perception.

This moral framing of labor is not incidental—it is foundational. In the Italian cultural imagination, work is not merely a means of economic survival but a civic and ethical obligation. The idea that “Italy is a democratic Republic founded on labor,” as stated in Article 1 of the Constitution, elevates work to the status of a constitutional principle. Labor becomes the condition of full citizenship, the axis around which rights and responsibilities revolve.

This is echoed in religious and political discourse alike. Catholic doctrine, for instance, has long associated labor with divine purpose and human dignity. Statements such as “Work is part of those indispensable conditions that a truly human society must guarantee so that everyone can not only survive but also realize themselves according to God’s design” reinforce the idea that labor is not

only necessary but sacred. Similarly, political figures across the spectrum have historically framed work as a moral imperative, a path to national greatness, and a bulwark against social decay.
In this context, the unemployed or those unwilling to work are not simply seen as economically inactive—they are morally suspect, socially deviant, and politically incomplete. The proverb "Chi si vergogna di lavorare, abbia vergogna di mangiare" ("He who is ashamed to work should be ashamed to eat") encapsulates this logic of exclusion. It is not just a warning—it is a sentence.
Thus, in the Italian context, labor is mythologized as the foundation of dignity and citizenship. The subject is not only expected to work but to identify with work, to derive self-worth from it, and to accept suffering as a necessary condition of belonging. The proverb, in this framework, is not a neutral expression of folk wisdom—it is a cultural injunction, a moral compass, and a political tool.
Beyond the glorification of labor as a moral and civic duty, Italian proverbial culture also encodes a deep sense of guilt associated with inactivity. This guilt is not merely emotional—it is structurally embedded in the cultural logic of performance. The subject who does not work is not only excluded from dignity and citizenship but is also positioned as morally inferior, even suspicious.
A particularly telling expression of this logic is the proverb "Chi lavora fa la gobba, chi ruba fa la robba" ("Those who work become hunchbacked, those who steal get rich"). This saying reveals a cynical awareness of systemic injustice—acknowledging that honest labor often leads to physical exhaustion and little reward, while those who exploit the system may thrive. Yet, rather than undermining the work ethic, the proverb reinforces it through a paradoxical mechanism: it produces guilt not only for inactivity but also for questioning the value of labor itself.
This internalized guilt manifests in the reluctance to rest, the fear of being perceived as lazy, and the compulsion to justify one's worth through constant productivity. Even when the system is recognized as exploitative, the subject remains bound to it, unable to detach from the moral imperative to work. The result is a form of self-disciplining subjectivity, where guilt becomes a tool of control, and inactivity is experienced not as a pause, but as a failure.

4.2 The Ethos of Conformity (Japan)

In the Japanese cultural context, the ideology of performance is articulated not through the glorification of individual sacrifice, but through the imperative of social harmony and behavioral alignment. The subject is not called to distinguish themselves through effort or merit, but rather to integrate seamlessly into the collective, avoiding any form of disruption or excess visibility.
This ethos is crystallized in proverbs that encode a normative model of conformity. The expression "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down" (出る杭は打たれる) functions as a cultural injunction against deviation. It does not merely warn against standing out—it prescribes invisibility as a form

of virtue. In this framework, performance is not measured by excellence, but by the ability to remain within the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. The ideal subject is one who does not disturb the equilibrium, who adapts silently, and who fulfills expectations without attracting attention.

Another widely circulated saying, “He who wakes early gains three mon” (朝起きは三文の徳), reinforces the value of discipline and punctuality. The emphasis is not on ambition or personal success, but on the quiet fulfillment of routine obligations. The reward is modest, symbolic, and collective. The proverb does not promise transformation or elevation—it affirms the virtue of regularity and the moral weight of consistency.

This cultural logic produces a subjectivity that is highly self-regulating. The pressure to conform is not necessarily imposed from above; it is internalized, enacted through everyday behaviors, and reinforced by the fear of exclusion. The subject learns to anticipate the gaze of others, to suppress dissent, and to align their desires with the expectations of the group. In this sense, conformity becomes a form of performance in itself—one that is measured not by visibility, but by the absence of friction.

Thus, in the Japanese context, the ideology of performance is embedded in a collective imaginary that privileges harmony over distinction, silence over assertion, and continuity over rupture. The proverb, once again, functions as a cultural operator: it does not merely reflect values—it produces them, shaping the contours of what is thinkable, sayable, and livable.

Within the Japanese cultural framework, discipline is not merely a behavioral trait—it is a moral orientation, a mode of being that aligns the individual with the collective rhythm of society. The disciplined subject is not celebrated for personal ambition, but for their capacity to maintain order, respect hierarchy, and fulfill their role without disruption. This form of discipline is quiet, internalized, and continuous. It does not require external enforcement because it is embedded in the very structure of everyday life.

Adherence to the group is equally central. The individual is not conceived as an autonomous unit, but as a node within a relational network. Success is not defined by personal distinction, but by the ability to contribute to the cohesion of the whole. In this context, standing out is not a sign of excellence—it is a breach of harmony. The subject is expected to anticipate the needs of others, to avoid conflict, and to prioritize the collective over the self. This logic is not coercive in appearance, but it is deeply normative in effect.

Discretion, in this setting, becomes a virtue. The ideal subject is one who does not speak unnecessarily, who does not impose their presence, who knows when to withdraw. Visibility is not a goal—it is a risk. The cultural imperative is to be efficient without being seen, to act without

attracting attention, to exist without disturbing. This produces a form of subjectivity that is highly attuned to context, sensitive to nuance, and trained in self-restraint.

These values—discipline, group adherence, and discretion—are not abstract ideals. They are lived realities, reinforced through language, ritual, and social expectation. The proverb, once again, plays a crucial role in this process. It does not instruct explicitly; it insinuates. It does not command; it suggests. And in doing so, it shapes the contours of what is possible, permissible, and desirable.

In the Japanese cultural framework, labor is not primarily framed as a path to individual fulfillment or upward mobility, but as a social obligation—an act of participation in the collective order. The workplace is not merely a site of production, but a microcosm of society, where roles are clearly defined and interpersonal dynamics are governed by implicit codes of respect, hierarchy, and mutual responsibility.

Work, in this context, becomes a stabilizing force. It is through labor that the individual affirms their place within the group, contributes to the maintenance of social equilibrium, and fulfills expectations that are not only professional but moral. The act of working is thus inseparable from the logic of belonging. To work is to be integrated; to not work is to risk marginalization—not only economically, but symbolically.

This conception of labor as a social duty is reinforced by the absence of overt contestation. The subject is not encouraged to question the structure, but to adapt to it. The ideal worker is not the innovator or the disruptor, but the one who ensures continuity, who absorbs pressure without complaint, and who maintains the invisible threads of collective cohesion. In this sense, labor functions as a ritual of alignment—a daily reaffirmation of one's commitment to the group.

The harmony that results is not accidental; it is produced and reproduced through countless acts of discretion, discipline, and deference. The proverb, once again, plays a formative role: it encodes this logic in compact, memorable form, guiding behavior without the need for explicit instruction. It is not the content of the work that matters most, but the way it is performed—quietly, reliably, and in accordance with the expectations of the collective.

Italian popular culture offers an unusually dense gallery of work-centred sayings that moralize labour and stigmatize idleness. Expressions such as "Work ennobles man," "He who is ashamed to work should be ashamed to eat," and "He who does not work dies in the straw" portray employment as the condition for dignity, belonging and even access to basic goods. In the same repertoire, the idea that rest must be deserved surfaces explicitly (Pavese: "One aspires to have a job to earn the right to rest"), echoing older civic-religious tones that align effort with virtue and salvation. These maxims do more than decorate speech; they structure a moral economy in which

inactivity becomes culpable and shameful, while endurance and self-denial are valorized as pre-political truths.

Japan presents a different, though convergent, configuration. Work-specific proverbs are rarer, but a broader motivational-conformist repertoire saturates the everyday. Sayings like 朝起きは三文の徳 (waking early yields a modest gain) normalize discipline and routine; 為せば成る (if you do it, it will be done) and 七転び八起き (fall seven times, stand up eight) extol persistence without celebrating exceptionality. Most emblematic is 出る杭は打たれる (the nail that sticks out gets hammered down), a concise pedagogy of non-visibility in which the good subject aligns rather than distinguishes themself. If the Italian proverb often binds dignity to sacrifice, the Japanese one binds it to discretion and harmony. In both cases, the proverbial form naturalises social expectations in the Barthesian sense—myths that present historically situated norms as common sense (Barthes, 1957).

Placed side by side, these repertoires show two cultural grammars of performance: in Italy, a theology of labour that converts work into moral worth and makes rest conditional; in Japan, an ethic of alignment that elevates punctuality, restraint and collective rhythm over individual display. Both grammars, however, converge on the same effect: they shape subjectivities predisposed to sacrifice (Italy) or self-effacement (Japan), thereby smoothing the path for performance-oriented orders of work (Marcuse, 1963; Han, 2012; Chicchi & Simone, 2019, 2022).

5. Discussion

5.1 Proverbs as Devices of Subjectivation

Proverbs do not merely reflect cultural values—they actively participate in the construction of subjectivity. Their function is not descriptive but prescriptive: they shape the way individuals perceive themselves, their roles, and their place within the social order. Through their repetition and apparent obviousness, proverbs operate as normative devices that define what is acceptable, desirable, and legitimate.

In the context of the performance society, proverbs contribute to the production of specific subject positions. The responsible worker, the high-performing youth, and the deviant who must be corrected are not natural categories—they are cultural constructs, stabilized and circulated

through proverbial discourse. These figures are not only represented in language; they are enacted through it.

The responsible worker is the one who internalizes the moral imperative of labor. This subject does not work merely to earn a living, but to fulfill a duty, to prove worth, and to avoid shame. The high-performing youth is the one who anticipates expectations, who self-disciplines, who transforms every activity into a measurable output. This subject is not driven by desire, but by the fear of inadequacy. The deviant, by contrast, is the one who resists, who hesitates, who fails to conform. This figure is not only excluded but pathologized—framed as lazy, ungrateful, or socially dangerous.

Proverbs function as cultural technologies that produce these subjectivities by naturalizing the values they encode. They do not argue—they assert. They do not explain—they affirm. And in doing so, they render ideology invisible, embedding it in the fabric of everyday speech. The subject, in turn, does not simply repeat the proverb—they live it, embody it, and reproduce its logic in their choices, behaviors, and self-perceptions.

This mechanism is not neutral. It is a form of soft coercion, a way of governing through language. The proverb becomes a site where power is exercised not through force, but through meaning. It is here that the performance imperative is not only communicated, but internalized—transformed from an external demand into an internal necessity.

In the Italian context, subjectivity is constructed around the axis of sacrifice and merit. The individual is expected to demonstrate worth through effort, to earn dignity through labor, and to accept suffering as a necessary condition of social legitimacy. The responsible subject is one who works hard, who does not complain, and who internalizes the belief that rest must be deserved. This model produces a form of selfhood that is constantly measured against ideals of productivity, endurance, and moral uprightness.

In Japan, by contrast, subjectivity is shaped through conformity and silent adaptation. The ideal individual is not the one who excels, but the one who integrates. Value is not derived from standing out, but from maintaining harmony. The subject is expected to anticipate the needs of the group, to suppress personal desires, and to avoid any behavior that might disrupt the collective balance. Here, performance is not about distinction—it is about discretion.

In Italy, joblessness is widely experienced and publicly discussed as a structural fact, which makes declaring oneself unemployed socially thinkable—even if painful. The normalization of unemployment in everyday talk and media debate means that the “non-working” self is often narrated through guilt (feeling inadequate or not doing enough), yet it remains sayable and negotiable within family and peer networks. This discursive space matters: it allows people to seek

support, to justify pauses, and to re-enter the labor market without the same degree of social ostracism.

In Japan, by contrast, unemployment tends to carry a strong shame stigma: not having a job risks signaling a failure to align with collective expectations of steady, full-time employment beginning immediately after graduation. The social script privileges invisibility over confession: rather than declare unemployment, some retreat from view—one pathway into forms of social withdrawal (e.g., remaining at home, avoiding public exposure). The result is a moral economy where appearing out of sync with the group feels more threatening than admitting individual difficulty, and where the "unemployed self" is rendered unsayable in many ordinary contexts.

These different moral grammars shape how performance norms are internalized. In Italy, the unemployed subject may oscillate between guilt and critique—acknowledging systemic barriers (precarious contracts, underpayment, irregular work) while still feeling compelled to "deserve" re-entry through sacrifice. Public discourse around exploitation, unpaid internships, and contractual dumping, however, keeps open a vocabulary that locates part of the problem in institutions and markets. In Japan, the imperative is less to narrate one's exception than to avoid becoming one. The pressure is to remain aligned with the group, to minimize friction, and to preserve social harmony; hence the preference for silent adaptation or withdrawal over visible claim-making.

Proverbial common sense mirrors this split. Italian sayings and popular formulas moralize labor but also speak it—work, effort, rest, even idleness are named, judged, and publicly circulated. The Japanese repertoire more often encodes a norm of restraint and non-exposure—the classic warning against "sticking out" prescribes discretion rather than confession. In the first case, guilt attaches to not doing enough but remains expressible; in the second, shame attaches to being seen as out of line and thus encourages disappearance from the scene. These contrasting moral logics help explain why similar performance pressures yield different patterns of speech, silence, and subjectivity across the two contexts.

In both cases, proverbs function as cultural scripts that guide the formation of these subjectivities. They do not merely describe what people do—they shape what people become. Through their repetition, they inscribe norms into the body, the voice, and the imagination. The result is not a universal subject of performance, but culturally specific figures: the Italian who must prove their worth through sacrifice, and the Japanese who must preserve harmony through self-effacement.

5.2 Resonances in the Interviews

The analysis of the interviews reveals that the logic of performance embedded in proverbial discourse is not only culturally transmitted but also subjectively internalized. However, this

internalization does not always occur in explicit or conscious terms. Rather, it emerges through emotional responses, behavioral patterns, and the language used by the interviewees to describe their relationship with work. Among Italian respondents, several narratives reflect a latent sense of guilt, frustration, or inadequacy when personal rhythms or desires do not align with the demands of productivity. Some participants report having chosen academic or professional paths primarily to meet family expectations, only to later experience dissatisfaction or emotional exhaustion. These accounts suggest the presence of an internalized moral economy in which labor is not only a necessity but a measure of personal worth.

In the Japanese context, the interviews highlight a strong emphasis on social expectations, particularly regarding the prestige of the company one works for and the perceived legitimacy of one's career path. The pressure to enter a "respectable" company is described as intense, and failure to do so is often associated with shame or withdrawal. While the language of conformity is not always explicit, the narratives suggest a deep awareness of the need to align with collective norms and avoid behaviors that might disrupt social harmony.

Although no interviewee explicitly cites proverbs, the logic encoded in expressions such as "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down" or "He who wakes early gains three mon" resonates in the way respondents frame their experiences. The absence of direct references does not diminish the cultural weight of these sayings; rather, it confirms their function as background structures that shape perception and behavior without requiring conscious acknowledgment.

These findings reinforce the idea that proverbs operate as silent pedagogies. They do not need to be quoted to be effective. Their power lies in their capacity to shape the conditions of subjectivation, to define the boundaries of what can be said, felt, or desired. The interviews, in this sense, do not illustrate the proverbs—they enact them.

6. Conclusions

Popular proverbs operate as significant vectors of implicit culture, contributing to the transmission of performance-related values through everyday language. Their apparent simplicity masks a complex semiotic function: rather than merely reflecting social norms, they participate in their stabilization, embedding moral expectations into commonplace forms of speech and contributing to the shaping of subjectivity. In the Italian context examined here, proverbs articulate a moral economy of labor centered on effort, sacrifice, and responsibility, often linking dignity and

legitimacy to endurance and productivity. In the Japanese context, proverbial discourse more strongly emphasizes alignment, discretion, and social harmony, shaping subjectivity less through the injunction to excel than through the expectation to adapt and avoid disruption.

These culturally specific configurations should not be understood as exhaustive representations of Italian or Japanese societies, nor as static or homogeneous value systems. Rather, they reflect dominant symbolic tendencies that coexist with tensions, contradictions, and counter-discourses. The analysis suggests that the global imperative of performance does not operate uniformly, but is mediated by culturally embedded grammars that orient how work, effort, and conformity are understood and evaluated. Proverbs, in this sense, function as one among several mechanisms through which historically situated norms are rendered familiar and taken for granted.

The findings of this study do not claim a direct causal link between proverbial discourse and individual behavior. Instead, they point to a more diffuse process of cultural conditioning, in which repeated linguistic forms contribute to shaping shared expectations and moral vocabularies around work. The integration of qualitative interviews serves to illustrate how these logics resonate in everyday narratives, rather than to generalize attitudes or establish empirical prevalence. This highlights an important limitation of the study: its exploratory and interpretive nature restricts the scope of its claims to the level of cultural meaning, rather than behavioral determination.

From this perspective, any reflection on labor practices and workers' wellbeing benefits from considering not only institutional arrangements and economic incentives, but also the symbolic frameworks within which work is imagined and justified. Proverbial discourse represents a layer of implicit culture that often remains outside policy debates, yet contributes to legitimizing certain expectations—such as the moralization of sacrifice, the conditionality of rest, or the stigmatization of deviation—while rendering others less thinkable. Recognizing this symbolic layer does not imply rejecting proverbs or popular wisdom as such, but rather understanding their role within broader systems of meaning.

At the same time, this study has clear limits. It focuses on a selective corpus of well-known proverbs and on a small number of illustrative interviews, and it does not capture regional, generational, or class-based variations in the use and interpretation of these sayings. Nor does it address emerging counter-narratives that may challenge or reframe traditional moral vocabularies of work. These limitations suggest that the conclusions offered here should be read as indicative rather than definitive.

Nevertheless, making implicit cultural assumptions visible remains a necessary analytical step. Performance culture is rarely imposed solely through explicit rules or formal obligations; it is often sustained through ordinary language, shared sayings, and unexamined common sense. By

drawing attention to the role of proverbs in this process, the article contributes to a better understanding of how moral expectations surrounding labor are reproduced and normalized. This awareness may help open space for alternative interpretations of effort, responsibility, and social value—interpretations that do not reduce subjectivity to sacrifice or silence, and that allow work to be reconsidered as a socially situated, rather than morally absolute, domain of life.

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2. The author confirms that ethical approval was not needed since this kind of committee does not exist in his/her country.
3. Data availability: all data and dataset are provided and uploaded in the system, therefore, are available.

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