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The construction of the "ungrateful child" in *Malin Kundang*, *Pulau Jelapi, Si Tanggang,* and *Nakhoda Manis*: Transnational geopolitics of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam

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Abstract: *The narrative construction of the "ungrateful child" can be found across different regions. Malin Kundang comes from West Sumatra, Indonesia; Pulau Jelapi from Thailand; Si Tanggang from Malaysia; and Nakhoda Manis from Brunei Darussalam. The four stories developed in different sociocultural and geopolitical settings, but they share a number of substantive similarities. Stories about the "ungrateful child" are living narratives that have developed in various parts of Southeast Asia. They have different local characteristics, yet they show related narrative patterns and cultural values. This study aims to examine the construction of the "ungrateful child" narrative through the four stories. From a comparative literature perspective, the study examines similarities, differences, transformations, and intertextual relations by placing the stories within their sociocultural and ideological contexts through a cultural studies approach. The construction of the "ungrateful child" is analyzed using Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, which states that a text never exists independently but is always related to other texts that came before it through quotation, absorption, transformation, development, or changes in meaning. The findings show that the four stories not only share similar motifs and narrative structures but also reveal processes of negotiation and reconstruction of values according to the social, cultural, and ideological contexts of each country. The movement of the narratives across geographical and national boundaries indicates cultural migration, a process through which stories, motifs, values, and collective memories move, adapt, and acquire new meanings in different cultural spaces. In this sense, the construction of the "ungrateful child" can be understood as a transnational construction that demonstrates the cultural interconnectedness of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, while also highlighting cultural acculturation, adaptation, and transformation in Southeast Asia.*

Keywords: *cultural circuit, cultural migration, Southeast Asia, transnational construction, ungrateful child*

INTRODUCTION

Folklore is one of the media through which communities educate their members and preserve collective experience. This collective experience is related to the community's relationship with the natural and social environment and with supernatural matters (Yanuartuti, 2014; Amin, 2021). Its oral transmission across generations is closely related to storytelling traditions, including bedtime storytelling (Salniwati & Nurtikawati, 2016). Oral transmission allows changes, reductions, and additions to occur in story elements, characters, events, places, and circumstances (Elvandari, 2020; Akporherhe & Oghenerioborue, 2021). Changes, additions, and

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reductions are possible because folklore is anonymous. Folklore is collectively owned by the communities that support it. Therefore, it tends to have many versions.

The variety of versions shows that folklore is not a text that remains fixed in one form. A story can continue to live when people retell, listen to, interpret, and use it in different contexts. In this process, a story may change not only in its events or characterization but also in its meaning (Teeuw & Wyatt, 1970; Furniss, 2005). A character understood at one point in time as representing a particular behavior may receive a different interpretation when the story enters a new social environment, medium, or cultural interest. Thus, the existence of various versions of folklore does not simply indicate inconsistency. It also shows the ability of folklore to adapt to changes in society.

Malin Kundang is one of the best-known figures in West Sumatran folklore. *Malin Kundang* was initially known as an ungrateful child (Wicaksono & Macaryus, 2019). Later, however, the story underwent transformation and acquired new meanings. These changes were adapted to the uses and needs of society. New meanings and uses can be seen in advertisements that draw on the popularity of folklore, such as *Malin Kundang* in an *Avian* paint advertisement, *Timun Mas* in a *Marjan* syrup advertisement (Wicaksono & Macaryus, 2019; Firmansyah & Rusdiarti, 2025), and *Aladdin* in a *Djarum 76* advertisement (Andrianto et al., 2019).

The use of *Malin Kundang* in different forms shows that folklore can move beyond its initial function as a story passed down from generation to generation (Ceriaco et al., 2011; Riley & Priston, 2010). When it enters popular media, a story may be condensed, parodied, played with, or placed in a situation completely different from its original context. The popularity of a character becomes a cultural resource that allows audiences to recognize the reference immediately even when the plot and purpose of its use have changed. In other words, what is preserved is not always the entire story. It may be the character's name, a particular trait, a conflict, or the collective memory attached to the story.

That transformation also shows the relationship between folklore and contemporary social life. A widely known story provides a kind of shared memory that can be reused to convey new ideas. When an advertisement presents *Malin Kundang*, for example, people do not need to be introduced at length to the character. The name *Malin Kundang* already carries a number of associations that can be recognized immediately. This process shows that the vitality of folklore lies not only in its ability to be preserved but also in its ability to be read and reused in changing situations.

Malin Kundang is also interesting when placed within a comparative perspective on folklore in Southeast Asia. The motif of a child who changes his life, leaves his parents, achieves a certain social status, and then rejects or refuses to acknowledge his mother can be found in several stories in the region. This similarity raises questions about the relationship between stories, cultural space, and human experiences that may be shared by different communities. Therefore, similarities between stories cannot immediately be considered evidence that one story is a copy of another. These similarities require further examination of the story structure, motifs, cultural contexts, and possible relationships among the communities behind them.

The presence of *Malin Kundang* as an ungrateful child resembles several elements in the folklore of *Pulau Jelapi* (Thailand), *Si Tanggang* (Malaysia), and *Nakhoda*

Manis (Brunei Darussalam). The presence of the ungrateful child figure may have several explanations. First, the four cultural regions may have constructed their stories from a common source as a proto-story. Second, there may be universal phenomena that were responded to similarly by the communities that supported these stories. Third, the four cultural regions may have had intensive cultural contact, resulting in strong mutual influence, including in folklore.

These three possibilities show that similarities between stories need to be viewed carefully. Similar motifs may emerge from historical relationships among communities, but they may also arise from relatively universal human experiences. The relationship between children and parents, the desire to change one's fate, journeys away from one's homeland, success elsewhere, and questions of recognition of one's origins are experiences found in many societies. Therefore, research on *Malin Kundang* and stories that resemble it needs to consider both possibilities: cultural connections and the independent emergence of similar motifs.

Malin Kundang cannot be understood only as a story about a child who is ungrateful to his mother. The continuity and transformation of the story show how folklore can continue to be negotiated by society. Changes in form and meaning can provide clues about changing views of family, social mobility, success, identity, and a person's relationship with their place of origin. This perspective also creates space for bringing together folklore studies, cultural transformation studies, and comparative studies of folklore (Mochamad Ilham, 2018; 2021).

Based on this discussion, it is important to examine *Malin Kundang, Pulau Jelapi, Si Tanggang,* and *Nakhoda Manis*. A comparison of the four stories can be directed toward identifying similarities and differences, especially in the motif of the ungrateful child, the structure of events, character traits, forms of conflict, and story resolution. The comparison can then be used to trace possible intertextual and intercultural relationships, as well as the possibility that similar stories emerge from relatively universal human experiences. Therefore, the study moves toward a broader question of how different communities construct, transmit, and give meaning to stories about a child who leaves his mother and later faces the consequences of rejecting his origins.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Folklore is part of oral tradition and, more broadly, part of the culture of a community. It is collectively owned, and its transmission takes place orally from generation to generation. Many studies have been conducted on this subject. Gultom and Mulyati (2023) compared Southeast Asian folklore in relation to BIPA learning (Nitami & Hartati, 2022). The stories discussed were "*Malin Kundang*," "*Si Tanggang*," "*Pulau Jelapi*," and "*Nakhoda Manis*." They stated that Jelami, Tanggang, and *Nakhoda Manis* share similarities in theme, plot, and characterization. The use of folklore from different countries as BIPA learning materials can also provide cultural information about the communities in the four countries discussed in the study.

The study shows that folklore can serve as an entry point for understanding the relationship between literature and culture. Stories from different countries may show almost identical patterns while still carrying the cultural background of each society. In BIPA learning, the similarities can help learners recognize intercultural relationships in Southeast Asia. From the perspective of oral literature studies, however, these

similarities also raise questions about how a story motif can appear in several different cultural regions and how each community gives its own character to that motif.

Daulay and Armalia (2023) compared two folktales, *Si Mardan* and *Malin Kundang*. Their study provides detailed information about the character of *Malin Kundang*. They state that *Malin Kundang* is diligent, hardworking, honest, and responsible toward his family. After getting married, he becomes even more diligent in working. However, when he meets his mother, he is disappointed because she is old. Earlier, he had also lied to Saudagar Ali and Rubayah, his wife, by saying that his mother had died. *Malin Kundang* also broke his promise to bring his mother with him. When he meets her, he is ashamed and refuses to acknowledge her. *Malin Kundang* behaves arrogantly and harshly toward his mother. Agustina, Mutmainnah, and Pamudi (2023) examined the folklore of *Malin Kundang* from Indonesia and *Si Tanggang* from Malaysia. The two stories from different countries share the same basic content, namely the story of an ungrateful child.

These findings show that *Malin Kundang* is not constructed from the beginning as a completely negative character. He is diligent and hardworking and wants to improve his life. His position changes when he meets his mother. This shift is important because it shows that the main issue in the story is not simply a child's success but how that success changes the character's relationship with his family and place of origin.

Agustina, Mutmainnah, and Pamudi (2023) further strengthen the finding that *Malin Kundang* and *Si Tanggang* intersect in important ways. The similarity lies not only in the presence of a child who is ungrateful to his mother but also in the pattern of the character's journey from his original environment to a new life. The character changes his status through travel and work and later encounters the mother who represents part of his past.

The series of studies published in various journals shows that the construction of the ungrateful child has attracted attention in the four Asian countries. The similarity in theme and story structure may have occurred through cultural migration. This may have taken place through the migration of people engaged in maritime trade involving actors from the four countries.

The four stories are compared using Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, which draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. Kristeva expanded this idea by stating that a text never exists independently. Every text is related to texts that came before it through absorption, transformation, development, or changes in meaning (Solà, 2023).

From this perspective, intertextuality does not simply mean looking for the influence of one text on another. More importantly, it involves examining how a text enters into dialogue with other texts or discourses and produces new meanings. A new text may retain elements of an earlier text while also changing, expanding, simplifying, or placing them in a different sociocultural context. Therefore, intertextual relationships are also relationships among contexts and discourses.

For the study of *Malin Kundang*, *Pulau Jelapi, Si Tanggang,* and *Nakhoda Manis*, this theory is relevant. The four stories can be treated as texts connected through motifs, narrative structures, characters, events, and cultural discourses. Intertextual analysis can be used to identify shared elements, elements that undergo transformation, and new meanings that emerge in each story. Thus, the study does not first have to prove which

story is the source. Instead, it can examine how the motif of the "ungrateful child" appears and is negotiated in four different cultural spaces.

METHOD

This qualitative interpretive study uses a comparative literature perspective and Julia Kristeva's intertextual approach (Ulinnuha et al., 2013). This perspective refers to the interpretation of structure, representation, values, identity, and processes of meaning-making (Anoegrajekti et al., 2021). This library-based study uses *Malin Kundang*, *Pulau Jelapi*, *Si Tanggang*, and *Nakhoda Manis* as its data sources. The data consist of narratives that form a sequence of events that builds the integrity of each story. The data in this study is in the form of units of events that overall build the storyline. These units of events also show the character of the perpetrator and the setting of the story.

Data analysis consisted of four stages, namely inventory, identification, classification, and interpretation (Sutopo, 2006). Data were inventoried using a reading and note-taking technique (Sudaryanto, 2015). Identification was used as the basis for classifying the data by identifying how ungrateful behavior is constructed by the communities that support the stories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identification of the narrative construction of ungrateful behavior in the four folktales from the four Asian countries shows a relatively similar pattern.

Result

The results of the study of four folktales from Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Elements of the stories about the ungrateful child

No.	Story Element	*Malin Kundang*	*Pulau Jelapi*	*Si Tanggang*	*Nakhoda Manis*
1.	Story origin	Indonesia	Thailand	Malaysia	Brunei Darussalam
2.	Parents	Malin Kundang and his mother (a widow)	The child of a widow	Husband and wife: Si Talang and Si Deruma	Manis, the son of Dang Ambun, a widow
3.	The child's journey by sea	Leaves home by sea. Works hard, is diligent and honest. Becomes wealthy and marries a beautiful woman.	Leaves home by sea and becomes a ship captain. At each port, he buys local goods to sell elsewhere. He becomes wealthy and marries a beautiful woman. He refuses to meet his mother and only sends money through others.	Travels by sea and works diligently. He is adopted by a ship captain. Si Tanggang is also a skilled trader. He becomes wealthy, marries a beautiful woman, and becomes a sultan's son-in-law.	Leaves home by sea. Becomes a wealthy ship captain and marries a beautiful woman.
4.	Mother's response	She is disappointed and hurt and curses her son to turn to stone. Lightning and large waves follow.	She is disappointed and hurt and throws the money into the sea.	Si Talang and Si Deruma visit Si Tanggang and bring his favorite smoked bananas. Si Tanggang feels ashamed and drives both parents away.	Dang Ambun prays for Manis's safety while he is away. When he returns, he refuses to acknowledge her and prays that God will punish him. A storm, lightning, and waves break the ship apart, and it turns into Batu Jong.
5.	Consequence of rejection	His mother's curse turns him to stone.	His mother's curse causes the ship to break apart and sink, and the child turns to stone.	When the ship reaches the middle of the sea, a storm breaks out and Si Tanggang's ship turns to stone.	After hearing his mother's voice, Manis wants to meet her. However, when he sees that she is old, dirty, and poorly dressed, he feels ashamed in front of his wife because he had lied and told her that his mother was wealthy.

The narrative construction of ungrateful behavior follows a patterned structure and reaches its critical point at a moment of reunion. This critical moment occurs during a brief encounter in which the contrast becomes clear between the child's abundant and

luxurious living conditions and the parents' lack of comparable achievements or improvements in their living conditions, as shown in the following figure.

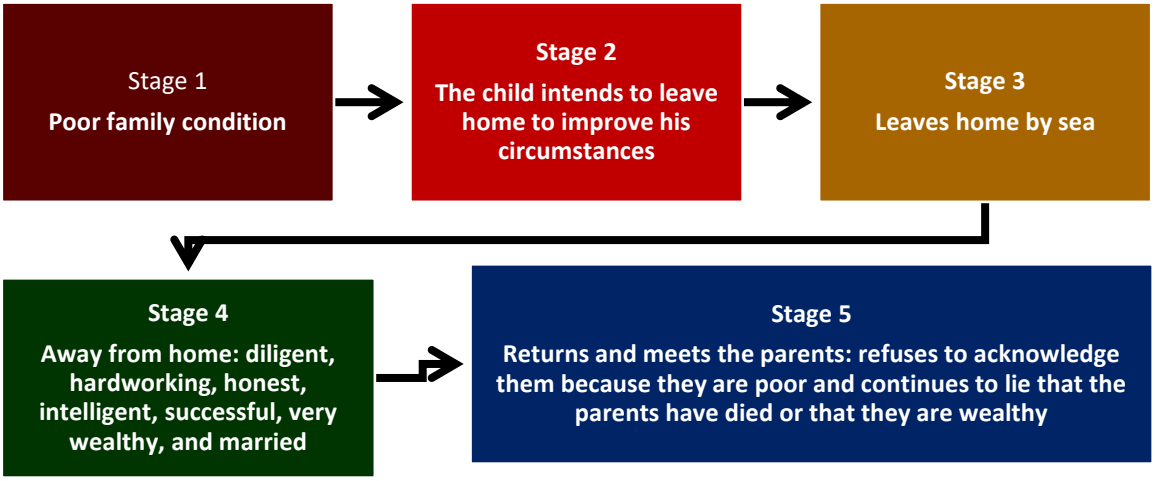


Figure 1. Narrative construction of the four stories about the ungrateful child

Based on the two figures, the construction of ungrateful behavior in the four stories follows a sequence of events that is nearly parallel. The child comes from a modest family, leaves the parents, travels by sea, works or trades, and eventually gains wealth and a higher social status. During this journey, the child's life changes significantly. He is no longer the child of a poor family but has become a ship captain, merchant, wealthy person, or member of a family with high social standing. This change in status becomes an important backdrop for the conflict that arises when the character meets his parents again.

The construction of ungrateful behavior reaches its peak not when the character leaves home, but when he reunites with his parents. A meeting that should provide an opportunity for recognition instead becomes a moment of rejection. The parents remain in modest circumstances, while the child appears with clothing, wealth, a spouse, and social status that signal his success. This gap triggers the child's shame. He does not want others, especially his spouse or new social circle, to learn about his past. Therefore, refusing to acknowledge the parents becomes the main sign of ungrateful behavior in all four stories.

Interestingly, the parents' responses to this rejection are not presented in exactly the same way. In Malin Kundang and Nakhoda Manis, the parents' prayers or curses are directly linked to natural disasters and the transformation of the character or the ship into stone. In Si Tanggang, the conflict also ends with the ship turning to stone after a storm. Pulau Jelapi, meanwhile, presents a different response: the mother, disappointed and hurt, throws into the sea the money her child has given her. These differences show that although the four stories share a similar pattern in their construction of ungrateful behavior, each community gives the conflict between children and parents its own form of resolution.

Discussion

The results above show that the four stories present a background of poor family life. This condition requires the parents to work hard to meet the family's needs. When the child reaches adulthood, he becomes aware of the family's poverty. Therefore, he is moved to leave his hometown and seek a life elsewhere in the hope of improving the family's situation, especially its economic condition. In all four stories, the parents initially refuse because they are afraid and worried about the fate of their beloved child.

Eventually, however, the parents give their permission. Their love for the child is represented through their continued prayers to God for the safety of the child who leaves home. The journey takes place by sea. This represents the fact that the four countries have strong maritime traditions and have historically been supported by sea fleets, a characteristic of the Southeast Asian region, including Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam.

This pattern shows that poverty in the four stories is not merely a social background. It becomes the reason that drives the entire sequence of events. Poverty creates a problem that the family must face, while leaving home becomes the path taken by the child. Thus, leaving home is not initially presented as a negative act. Instead, the child's departure comes from a desire to change his circumstances. He does not leave because he hates his family. He leaves because he sees the limitations of life in his hometown. In this position, migration becomes an effort to obtain a better life.

Interestingly, the journey then produces a change that goes far beyond its initial purpose. The child who originally comes from a poor family succeeds in gaining wealth, status, and a spouse from a higher social environment. At this stage, a change in social identity takes place. The child no longer appears as a member of the poor family he once knew but as someone who has a new life. On one hand, this change symbolizes the success of migration. On the other hand, it becomes a source of problems when the child has to face his past again.

The sea also has an important position in the four stories. It is not only the geographical space through which the characters travel when leaving their hometowns. It is also a transitional space between an old life and a new one. Before crossing the sea, the character is still the child of a poor family. After the journey, he has the opportunity to build a new life. The sea therefore becomes a kind of boundary between two worlds: the simple world of origin and the new world that offers wealth and social status. Yet the sea also becomes the space where disaster and punishment arrive at the end of the story.

An interesting pattern can be seen here. The sea, which opens the way to success at the beginning of the story, eventually becomes the space that brings the character back to the consequences of his actions. The ship that carries the child toward wealth becomes the ship that carries disaster. Storms, waves, lightning, and transformation into stone show that the maritime space has two faces in these narratives. The sea can provide a path to social mobility, but it can also become a force that humans cannot control. This contrast means that the character's journey does not remain a story of economic success. It develops into a story about moral consequences.

The child's changed life also reveals a paradox in the four stories. The success that initially becomes the goal of migration eventually becomes the source of ungrateful behavior. The child succeeds in escaping poverty, but that success makes him ashamed of his family of origin. He gains a materially better life but loses his relationship with the

people who were once an important part of his life. Thus, the problem in the stories is not wealth or migration itself. The problem emerges when a change in social status is followed by rejection of one's origins and parents.

The reunion between the child and the parents becomes the most important point in the construction of ungrateful behavior. The meeting brings two very different conditions face to face. The child arrives in luxury, while the parents remain in simple circumstances. The social distance that was not visible when the child still lived with the family becomes very clear when they meet again. The parents recognize the child through blood ties and past experiences, while the child sees the parents through their physical condition at that moment. This difference in perspective produces the conflict.

In the four stories, shame is an important element in the child's act of rejection. The child does not simply fail to recognize the parents. He attempts to break that relationship in front of his new social environment. The presence of a wife or other people who know his new status increases the pressure. The past, which should be part of his identity, is instead treated as something that must be hidden. Therefore, ungrateful behavior can be understood as an act of symbolically breaking one's relationship with one's origins after acquiring a new social identity.

From this perspective, the four stories are not only about the relationship between children and mothers. They are also about social mobility. A poor child can become wealthy through work, courage, trading skills, and travel. Society appears to recognize the possibility that a person can change his fate. However, this change has a moral limit: success should not make a person forget the people who raised him. This limit is then emphasized through the extraordinary punishment in the stories.

This shared pattern can also provide clues about the values considered important by the communities that support the stories. All four stories place the relationship with parents within a strong moral framework. Parents may be poor, old, or no longer have social status, but the relationship does not lose its value. The conflict reaches its peak when the child judges the parents based on their economic condition and appearance. In this framework, ungrateful behavior is not simply an act of being rude to one's mother. It is a rejection of the relationship and origins attached to a person's identity.

However, this similarity does not mean that the four stories are the same. Differences in parental responses, forms of disaster, supporting characters, and endings show processes of local adaptation. Each community gives its own form to the story pattern of a child who succeeds away from home and later rejects his parents. Therefore, the similarity in structure can be read as a point of convergence, while differences in story elements reveal the creativity and cultural distinctiveness of each community.

The narrative construction of the ungrateful child in the four stories moves through a relatively consistent sequence: family poverty – the desire to improve life – leaving home – economic success – social status change – reunion with the parents – rejection – parental response – disaster or punishment. This sequence shows that the main issue is not the child's success away from home but the change in the child's relationship with his origins after that success is achieved. At this point, folklore works as a space for social reflection: society imagines success while also reminding people that success should not sever their relationship with family and the past.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the construction of the "ungrateful child" in *Malin Kundang*, *Pulau Jelapi*, *Si Tanggang*, and *Nakhoda Manis* follows a relatively similar narrative pattern. The four stories begin with poor family conditions, the child's departure by sea, economic success and a change in social status, followed by a reunion with the parents that ends in rejection. Ungrateful behavior is mainly constructed when the child no longer acknowledges the parents and his origins after achieving a better life. Thus, the main conflict in the four stories does not lie in leaving home or achieving economic success but in the change in the child's relationship with the family after social mobility takes place.

The similarity in this pattern suggests possible cultural connections in Southeast Asia, a region historically characterized by human mobility and maritime trade networks. In the four stories, the sea functions not only as the setting for a journey but also as a space of movement, identity change, and encounters among communities. However, similarities in story structure cannot directly be understood as evidence of a single source or a process of cultural borrowing. They may also be related to relatively similar social experiences in Southeast Asian communities, especially poverty, migration, social mobility, and strong family ties. This finding place folklore as one of the cultural traces that can be used to examine possible transnational connections without overlooking the complexity of how such stories are formed.

The contribution of this study lies in reading the four stories together as narratives that move beyond national geographical boundaries. Similarities in motifs show points of cultural convergence, while differences in characters, settings, conflicts, parental responses, and forms of punishment show processes of local adaptation by each community. Thus, *Malin Kundang*, *Pulau Jelapi*, *Si Tanggang*, and *Nakhoda Manis* do not merely represent a moral message about the relationship between children and parents. They also record issues of social mobility, identity, origins, and cultural encounters in Southeast Asia. In this context, folklore can be viewed as a cultural text that shows how local experiences are negotiated within a broader and transnational cultural space.

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