

## Hang Tuah - Man or myth?

**Who is Hang Tuah? Warrior, mystical figure or a figment of a writer's imagination? ALLAN KOAY talks to a historian about whether documentation leans towards man or myth.**

### The Star

MANY stories abound, of the great Malay warrior, who – along with his four friends, Hang Jebat, Hang Kasturi, Hang Lekir and Hang Lekiu – upheld and protected the kingdom of Malacca, and who was so loyal to the Sultan that he even killed his own friend who had rebelled against the ruler.

Schoolchildren grow up learning about the adventures of Hang Tuah, older students study them in history lessons. Filmgoers have seen Hang Tuah in many guises, the latest being M. Nasir's portrayal in the RM16mil epic *Puteri Gunung Ledang*.

Yet, according to Prof Datuk Dr Mohd Yusoff Hashim, who has written several books and hundreds of articles on Malay history, there is no solid historical record that could undeniably prove Hang Tuah's existence. Except for one.

Prof Yusoff, whose books include *Persejarahan Melayu Nusantara* (Historiography of the Malay Archipelago) and *Sejarah Melayu: Persepsi Sejarah dan Kesusasteraan* (Sejarah Melayu: A Historical and Literary Perspective), strongly believes Hang Tuah did exist, and that the proof is in the *Sejarah Melayu* written in 1537. The main problem, said Prof Yusoff, is that people's perception of who Hang Tuah is is very much coloured by the more fictional *Hikayat Hang Tuah*.

"Malay literature consists of many genres, such as history, *undang-undang* (laws), religion and epics. We have to differentiate between them," said Prof Yusoff, who is president and rector of the Malacca Islamic College of Technology. "The story of Hang Tuah comes in two genres – history and the epic."



The only historical record that perhaps could prove the existence of Hang Tuah, portrayed by M. Nasir in the film *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, is the *Sejarah Melayu*.

Oral history also plays a part in the story of Hang Tuah, and Prof Yusoff sees that as problematic because oral history can be very speculative.

“People can say anything they want,” he explained. “The Javanese say Hang Tuah originated from Java. The Bugis say he originated from Bugis. The Perak people say he came from Perak. These people based their stories on the oral tradition. Of late, they are saying Hang Tuah came from China.”

*Sejarah Melayu* was written much, much earlier than *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. According to Prof Yusoff, the earliest version of *Sejarah Melayu* was written in 1537.

“After that, it became a very popular work,” he said. “It was copied and re-copied so many times that now, we have at least 29 versions of the *Sejarah Melayu*.”



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believes the writer probably referred to various written works for ideas. In fact, Prof Yusoff made an interesting discovery in his research.

The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* is believed to have been written sometime between 1641 and 1726, and as such, the book contains a lot of additions, omissions and interpolations. It is “an epic based on historical facts” and as such, should not be taken literally as the truth, but should be regarded as truth blended with fiction.

But *Hikayat Hang Tuah* proved to be the more popular work, as it contains fantasy and romance, unlike *Sejarah Melayu* which contains facts and records of historical events that, to the layman, may be dull and boring. In *Hikayat*, the famous warrior is portrayed as having mystical powers and lethal fighting moves. He even possessed the ability to speak many languages, after being given a magical potion by a prophet. All he had to do was dab his lips with the potion and he would be able to speak the local tongue of whatever locale he was in.

As such, the writer of *Hikayat* wrote that the warrior was an ambassador sent by the Sultan to many foreign countries such as India, China and Turkey. He is said to have even performed the Haj.

Prof Yusoff said none of this is mentioned in *Sejarah Melayu*. But he

“The writer also referred to the *Bustan’us-Salatin (Garden of Kings)*, which was a historical and religious work by Sheikh Nuruddin ar-Raniri (a religious scholar from Aceh),” he explained.

“This work was written in the early part of the 17th century. So it was written earlier than the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. I found that the writer of the *Hikayat* not only referred to the *Garden of Kings*, but also copied certain passages word-for-word, to make up the story of Hang Tuah visiting Turkey.

“And the story about Hang Tuah visiting China was taken from the *Sejarah Melayu*, from the story about Malaccan delegates headed by Tun Perpatih Putih who were sent to China.

“Hang Tuah may have been an ambassador, but he was probably sent to only as far as Indonesia and other places in the Malay Archipelago.”

Hang Tuah, according to *Sejarah Melayu*, also never met Puteri Gunung Ledang, but it was instead a member of his entourage who met the princess and noted her conditions for marrying the Sultan. *Hikayat Hang Tuah* also claims that Hang Tuah and his entourage went to Majapahit 10 times, but in the *Sejarah Melayu*, they only visited it once.

Hang Tuah also never went to Pahang to bring Tun Teja back to Malacca, as written in *Hikayat*, but it was a court official by the name of Hang Nadim who did so.

*Hikayat*'s immense popularity, said Prof Yusoff, could possibly account for the many discrepancies and variations pertaining to the story of Hang Tuah, and it even prompted some people to claim that Hang Tuah never existed and was just a figment of someone's imagination. And the many versions of *Sejarah Melayu* also add to the confusion.

It has been long known that it was not Hang Jebat but Hang Kasturi who was killed by Hang Tuah, and Prof Yusoff said this was written in the original *Sejarah Melayu*. But the more popular story that involves Hang Jebat prevails in people's minds. That episode alone has over the years divided opinions. In the P. Ramlee film *Hang Tuah*, as Hang Jebat dies in his arms, Hang Tuah (played by P. Ramlee) utters: “*Siapa yang bersalah?* (Who is wrong?)”

In the 1960s and 70s, the popular opinion was that Hang Jebat was the hero, and Hang Tuah was giving blind loyalty to the ruler. But Prof Yusoff said this view was borne of the anti-establishment mindset of the time.

“To me, Hang Tuah was the hero,” he elaborated. “He was the one who really upheld the kingdom. Without this kind of character, the kingdom would have fallen into chaos and collapsed. Whatever happened, regardless of what people said about him, he remained loyal to the ruler, until the day he died.

“There was even an anecdote about how, one day, the Sultan's horse fell into a pool of faeces. No one dared rescue the horse, except Hang Tuah. He jumped into the pool and pulled the horse out. After that he had to clean himself for seven days and seven nights.

“That may be a joke, but the message is about undivided loyalty. The king is the highest, without whom there would be no kingdom. After all, the word *kerajaan* (kingdom or government) comes from the word *raja* (king).”

But it remains that no definitive historical record exists to prove Hang Tuah's existence, except for *Sejarah Melayu*. Even in *The Suma Oriental*, by Tome Pires who came to

Malacca in 1513, two years after the collapse of the empire, there is mention of a *laksamana* (admiral) but no specific mention of Hang Tuah by name. But the site claimed to be the grave of Hang Tuah in Tanjung Kling, Malacca, was gazetted by the state government more than 10 years ago as the true Makam Hang Tuah.

And Prof Yusoff remains strongly convinced that Hang Tuah was a real person, of flesh and blood, who lived in Malacca and served under three rulers, and died during Sultan Mahmud's rule. And his reason is more than convincing.

"I dare say that Hang Tuah was a real figure, and I base my conclusion on the *Sejarah Melayu*," he said. "If you deny Hang Tuah's existence, it means you also deny the whole historical text of the *Sejarah Melayu*."

Your views or comments are appreciated.

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