

Is Hang Tuah for real?

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A lack of evidence is a perennial problem stalking all those interested in early Malaysian history. Although once home to several prominent pre-modern kingdoms, Malaysia has not preserved the textual resources nor rich archaeological record necessary to produce authoritative history.

A consequence of this is heated debate, most notably concerning the historicity of certain prominent individuals, such as famed Melakan warrior Hang Tuah.

In recent years, several radically opposing views have developed concerning Hang Tuah, from Rohaidah Kamaruddin's claim to have found confirmation of his existence in Japanese records, to Ahmat Adam's assertion that Hang Tuah is "a fictional character that existed in the classic texts of Sejarah Melayu and Hikayat Hang Tuah only".

This last, rather controversial, opinion has begun to garner widespread support in Malaysia. It is, therefore, worth examining further; could Hang Tuah really be fictitious?

Our modern image of Hang Tuah derives largely from the late 17th to early 18th century Johor text, Hikayat Hang Tuah. This in turn draws upon Sejarah Melayu, also from Johor, but dated more than half a century earlier, to 1621.

Problematically, Hikayat Hang Tuah shows obvious signs of embellishment and appropriation. For instance, at its heart sits a war between Melaka and Majapahit, caused by Mansur Shah's marriage to a Pahang princess. Although this conflict is the backdrop to much of the Hang Tuah story, no other early Malay, Javanese, or European source attests to it. Sejarah Melayu, for example, merely claims a young Hang Tuah visited Majapahit in the company of Mansur Shah when the latter married the daughter of the Batara of Majapahit. No war is mentioned. Rather, this Melaka-Majapahit conflict appears to be a cypher for the Johor-Jambi conflict of 1666-1688.

Occurring shortly before Hikayat Hang Tuah was written, this conflict likewise began because of a royal marriage, before proceeding through a similar series of events to those described in Hikayat Hang Tuah.

More particularly, many of the actions attributed to Hang Tuah during this war correspond to events in the life of Abd al-Jamil, the Johor Laksamana who triumphed over Jambi, suggesting that aspects of the latter's biography have been transposed onto Hang Tuah.

This need not mean, however, that Hang Tuah is merely a fictionalised version of Abd al-Jamil; Hang Tuah's biography, with its roots in Sejarah Melayu, written long before the Johor-Jambi conflict, extends far beyond any resemblance to Abd al-Jamil.

It is true, however, that all the stories surrounding Hang Tuah, whether in Hikayat Hang Tuah or Sejarah Melayu, seem designed to convey one message: loyalty to the monarch. Could Hang Tuah, therefore, be nothing more than a convenient fiction designed to convey this traditional Malay value?

Several reasons make this unlikely.

First, early Malay writers did not compose purely fictitious narratives. Rather, they merged genuine historical events with myth, co-opting the otherworldly aura of the latter to enhance the status of the former.

Thus, Sejarah Melayu heavily mythologises the origin of Melaka's ruling house, both to sanctify its sultans and justify their right to rule.

Doing so, however, does not imply those individuals or their dynasty were fictitious; it merely bolstered their legitimacy. By the same token, a mythologised account of Hang Tuah does not mean he was imaginary, only that his biographer wished to enhance his standing.

It should also be borne in mind that early Malay epic biographies centred on a single individual are rare. Aside from Hikayat Hang Tuah, only one comparable example exists from the same period: Hikayat Aceh, an equally mythologised biography of Sultan Iskandar Muda. Since the latter was undoubtedly a real person, no precedent exists for a pre-modern Malay text centred on an entirely imaginary figure, suggesting Hikayat Hang Tuah refers to a real person.

Finally, the Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires (written 1512-1515), generally considered authoritative on Melakan history, refers to only three (unnamed) Melakan Laksamana, one under Mansur Shah and two under Mahmud Shah. Significantly, Sejarah Melayu also identifies just three Melakan Laksamana, reputedly the only three bearers of the title: Hang Tuah under Mansur Shah, followed by Khoja Hussain and Hang Nadim under Mahmud Shah.

According to Sejarah Melayu, Khoja Hussain died after Mahmud Shah's scandalous marriage to Tun Fatimah, the daughter of his Bendahara, while Hang Nadim survived the Portuguese conquest to command the Johor navy. Pires records precisely the same information about his final two Laksamana, thereby corroborating Sejarah Melayu's account.

Within that context, the possibility that Pires's first Laksamana is Hang Tuah must be taken seriously. Moreover, Pires also mentions Mansur Shah's Treasurer, said to have been a Tamil and the grandfather of the aforementioned Bendahara. According to Sejarah Melayu, the latter was Tun Mutahir, whose grandfather was Tun Ali. This last individual was indeed Mansur Shah's Treasurer, as well as the son of Tun Rana Wati, daughter of the Tamil merchant Mani Purindan. Again, therefore, the texts confirm each other.

More significantly, however, Sejarah Melayu describes Tun Ali as Hang Tuah's patron, while Khoja Hussain and Hang Nadim were supposedly his son-in-laws. As

we can state with confidence that these three people existed, it is clear that figures from within the broader Hang Tuah tradition are demonstrably verifiable.

Combined with the points discussed above, this dramatically increases the probability that Hang Tuah was also once a real person.

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