



By Dr Farish A. Noor

First published in author's Facebook page

Over the last two days I have been interviewed three times by three different media publications over the question of where I stand on the latest silly debate in Malaysia, namely the question of whether Hang Tuah existed or not, and whether it ought to be taught in schools. This is, I have to confess, one of the smaller histories of Malaysia that has been in the footnotes of my mind for

ages, and I recall how I was once asked by an elderly gentleman during a forum discussion in KL in 1998 if it was true that Hang Tuah was of Chinese origin.

Let me state what little I know of the matter, and make my stand relatively clearer:

Firstly, I don't know or care if Hang Tuah was Chinese, Malay, Japanese, Eskimo or Serbo-Croat. He could have been a mix of all of the above with a Martian wife and a Venusian mother-in-law for all I care.

Secondly, no, there is no record of the keris Taming Sari either, and every antique shop that claims to have one is lying to get your money;

Thirdly, please note that in the Hikayat Hang Tuah we also have stories of kerises that fly, magical potions, demons and monsters, and a magical bean that when swallowed allows you to speak all languages. (A bit like the Babel fish in the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy methinks.)

Look, for the umpteenth time may I state that in my opinion the Hikayat Hang Tuah is a work of fiction. Looking for facts in fiction is like trying to find the exact location where the battle of the Mahabharatta was fought, or the exact spot where King Arthur removed the sword Excalibur from the stone. Its a story, for heavens sake!

Though I have not read the exact comments made by Professor Khoo Kay Kim that sparked off this debate, I was made to understand that all Prof Khoo said was that Hang Tuah did not exist in the form of an actual, living, historical human being. On that count he happens to be right, as there are also no written records to show that Marco Polo ever went to China - and some historians have even claimed that his account of China was entirely fabricated, and put together from other accounts of other travellers who did make the journey to the land of the Celestials themselves.

Hang Tuah was, and remains, a myth: And Myths are only that - grand narratives that make it into the national consciousness and become part of a nation's symbolic and discursive repertoire. Some works of fiction may indeed have historical details in them, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* stands out as a prominent example. Nobody doubts that Napoleon existed, that Napoleon invaded Russia, that the battle of Borodino was fought in 1812. But just because these places and dates are true does not mean that Pierre Besuhov or Prince Andrei Bolkonsky existed too. Tolstoy simply weaved a monumental tale that was spun through a combination of fiction and facts, and the product was a classic of European literature.

And this is where my gripe lies: That for decades too many extreme right-wing nationalist buffoons in Malaysia have sought to instrumentalise the myth of Hang Tuah as a vehicle for all sorts of nefarious and dubious ideological ends: as a testament to ethnic majoritarianism, as a primordial claim to land and belonging, as a means to proclaim ethnic dominance etc.

And yet - until today - an overwhelming number of semi-literate Malaysians pontificate at length about a text they have never read in full. People claim Hang Tuah as a member of their 'race', despite the fact that in the second part of the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* the character renounces all worldly belonging to kingdom and kind.

Right-wing nationalists claim him as an ethnic hero, despite the fact that by the end of the story Hang Tuah gives up his keris, abandons his kingdom, turns his back on power and becomes a

wandering everyman mystic-emissary of peace. He finds/found salvation through a denial of the world and its attendant riches and power, and becomes a nobler man because he denies racism, nationalism and forms of parochial sectarian power-politics. That is why he is a hero, for heavens sake. And despite all that -which can be found in the Hikayat if only people took the time to read it - Malaysians still ask if Hang Tuah was Malay or Chinese???

I agree with Prof Khoo that history has to begin by teaching students to differentiate between fact and fiction, data and myths. The Hikayat Hang Tuah falls in the latter category - but as a myth it is, and should be seen as, truly inspiring, uplifting and noble for the manner in which it valorises our common humanity above all else. Hang Tuah, in the end, does not care about race: So why should we??

In the final analysis, the Hikayat Hang Tuah ought to be taught in our schools - but only if it is taught in full, and equal emphasis is given to the development of the character who eventually becomes a universal figure, standing above narrow ethnic and political loyalties, and who sees the human race as his family and the world as his home. What a great message that would be for a new generation of global and globalising Malaysians!

But for that to happen Malaysia still has to evolve a little further, and we need to render ourselves immune to the crass and vulgar attempts to turn our national heroes, myths and

legends into parochial tales to frighten the masses and to compel blind loyalty from people who can't even read beyond page one.

**Further reading - Dr Farish's views on Hang Tuah are well expressed in his book What your Teacher Didn't Tell You, by Mata Hari Publications.*