

# RSOG LEADERSHIP FORUM

## Yang Empunya Cerita: Lessons from Hang Tuah

with

**Sasterawan Negara Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh**

**When** : 21 July 2016  
**Where** : Razak School of Government  
**Speakers** : Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh

### About the Seminar

The lore of Hang Tuah has long been passed down for generations in Malaysia. A key figure in the 15th century Melaka Sultanate, his story as the revered *Laksamana* for the king serves as a testament to many Malaysians on the virtues of loyalty and tradition. A just, yet fearsome individual, Hang Tuah is commonly associated with the Malay rallying cry "*Tak akan Melayu hilang di dunia*". The feats and travels of Hang Tuah reaches epic proportions and are detailed in the traditional Malay manuscript *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (translated by Malaysian National Laureate Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh in 2010). In 2001, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* was registered into the UNESCO Memory of the World and to this day, remains a profound product of its age and its system of values. Do the values championed by the illustrious Malay warrior continue to stand in today's era of modernisation and globalisation? This Leadership Forum intends to explore to what extent does Hang Tuah relate to the common man in the 21st century.

### Summary

In the 15th century, the famous *Laksamana* Hang Tuah embodied the prevalent Malaysian culture which placed heavy emphasis on decorum and devotion. Hang Tuah's absolute loyalty to his king has become synonymous with his legend, and is one that transcends the history of Malaysia.

A compilation of Hang Tuah's tale can be found in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, a literary work compiled approximately 200 years after the subject's life. In it, many will find well-known tales of the warrior: his battles against the Javanese *amok*, his rise of status in the Melakan palace, and his epic confrontation with Hang Jebat. The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* serves as a documentation of the most prized values at the time and a guide for morality and principles. So revered was this body of work that it was not uncommon for Malaysian royalty to possess an elegant copy of the book. The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* was most recently translated by national

laureate Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh, who has grown to make sense of this renowned Malay figure.

Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh described his quest for evidence of Hang Tuah around Malaysia and Indonesia. Beyond the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the warrior can be found in other prolific Malay works. He was mentioned 128 times in the *Sulat al-Salatin* and 2 times in *Tuhfat Al-Nafis*, as well as in various contemporary art forms (films, comics, music etc.). Despite his extensive presence in works, much less can be said about his historical presence. Of note, the most prominent evidence of Hang Tuah can be found in a letter sent to the emperor of Ryukyu between 1480 to 1481, where a *laksamana* was documented to have visited. Despite Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh's travels, many sites associated with Hang Tuah have turned out to be inauthentic. Much debate continues on the true history of Hang Tuah and will likely carry on for many years to come.

Equally important, if not more, according to Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh is the discussion on Hang Tuah's characteristics and values. The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* describes the many trials endured by Hang Tuah that highlights his many qualities. In many instances of adversity, Hang Tuah had shown bravery and physical prowess. The lore of Hang Tuah has shown him to be of Herculean nature and has cemented his stature in Malaysian history as a champion for the Malays.

However, a point of contention for many modern readers is Hang Tuah's utmost allegiance towards the Sultan and betrayal of his ally Hang Jebat, which has become a topic of great interest and a point of debate on the topic of morality in both the local and global spheres. As pointed out by Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh, critics such as Boris Parnikel and Kassim Ahmad have championed the values of Hang Jebat over Hang Tuah, whose sense of justice put him at odds against the Sultan for his unjust accusation of Hang Tuah. Although questions over Hang Tuah's dignity in his feud against Hang Jebat remains, it is without doubt that he had let go of personal feelings and persisted in absolute loyalty.

Hang Tuah's values were not limited to allegiance to his king and physical prowess. As Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh revealed in the discussion, Hang Tuah was said to have had a very progressive attitude towards education, perhaps due to values of the growingly international Melakan society. In *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, Hang Tuah was claimed to have mastered 12 languages and invited his compatriots to educate themselves in *prosopology* (study of facial expressions). His penchant for education had later contributed to his success as an ambassador for Melaka.

One value that was repeatedly brought up by Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh was his depiction of Hang Tuah as a warrior full of 'sweetness' in juxtaposition of his 'warrior' attributes. The speaker's unexpected description of 'sweetness' establishes a lighter tone, as if to demonstrate the humble character that Hang Tuah possessed. The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* described his humility, openness and innate respect of his superiors, despite fame and honour being bestowed upon him (a concept known as *merendahkan diri*). In addition, Hang Tuah was well-known for his observance for etiquette and fine, polite language, especially in a society that held royalty to such a high stature.

The ethics of Hang Tuah as outlined by Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh displayed many characteristics of the famous warrior, but above all was his main value: his loyalty to his leader. Perhaps, absolute loyalty as advocated by Hang Tuah should be viewed contextually but his drive for education and politeness may prove worthwhile in today's society. In any case, the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* remains a respected work which provides insight into the Malay psyche in the 15th century through its main character Hang Tuah.

Hang Tuah is effectively a *dream* that is carried out through generations – it is a wish that could or could not be realised. Nevertheless, it gives hope to move on. As famously pointed by Malcolm Forbes, “*when you cease to dream you cease to live*”,

### **Key Issues Raised**

1. The variety of sources on Hang Tuah has allowed for contestation from the day the *Hikayat* was written until today. Although associated now for his devotion to his values and skills as a warrior due to the popularity of the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the *Sulat-al Salatin* actually describes Hang Tuah as a somewhat moderate and normal human being. All works which discuss Hang Tuah are based around historical figures, but his legend is a compilation of embellished stories to express the characteristics of the ideal Malay in the 15th century.
2. The oral manner in which Hang Tuah's tales are passed down allows for many to influence the legend. Apart from knowing the stories, the authors hold a tremendous responsibility in portraying the environment and psyche of the Malays at that time through the Hang Tuah symbol. 'Geniuses' who interpreted the work did not only take the legend at face value, but studied the philosophy behind the manner in which it was delivered.
3. The 'sweetness' of Hang Tuah along with his skills in battle portrays Hang Tuah as a multi-dimensional figure that serves as an example to many Malaysians. Among the many lessons to learn from Hang Tuah, is his openness and respect to his compatriots. However, as Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh ponders, these are values that are missing today, particularly in Malaysian society. These values can be inculcated through education and through better communication.
4. One of the lesser-known traits of Hang Tuah was his desire for education. This was seen as necessary given Melaka's stature as an international hub, and was evident in the latter portions of the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* when he assumed the role of a diplomat for Melaka. Thus, his self-determination in improving himself and general awareness (*periksa*) makes for an ideal figure to emulate in the 21st century.

### **About the Speaker**

Professor Muhammad Haji Salleh is a Malaysian National Laureate and renowned Malay poet and author. Born on 25 March 1942 in the state of Perak, he is best known for his bilingual poetry collections, including the exceptional *Sajak-Sajak Pendatang* (1973), *Sajak-Sajak dari*

Sejarah Melayu (1981) and Rowing Down Two Rivers (2000). In addition, he has written, edited and translated over 55 books in both Bahasa Malaysia and English, and has had numerous academic appointments, particularly as the first holder of the European Chair in Malay Studies in Leiden University and as a fellow at the Harvard-Yenching Institute. In 1997, Professor Muhammad was conferred the S.E.A Write Award and in 2008 was awarded the National Eminent Academic Scholar Award.

## **Contact**

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