

CHINESE CHARM AND PERSONAGES IN MALAY HISTORIOGRAPHY

(Persona dan Pesona China dalam Historiografi Melayu)

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To cite this article (*Rujukan artikel ini*): Jelani Harun. (2021). Chinese Charm and personages in Malay Historiography. *Malay Literature*, 34(2), 143–162. [http://doi.org.10.37052/ml34\(2\)no1](http://doi.org.10.37052/ml34(2)no1)

Received: Peroleh:	29/6/2021	Revised: Semakan	-	Accepted: Terima:	1/9/2021	Publish online: Terbit dalam talian:	7/12/2021
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Abstract

Historiographical works are an important source in tracing the early interactions between the Malays and Chinese, through the depiction of certain personages. Furthermore, the Malay society's knowledge about China is presented by the writers through charming descriptions of Chinese customary practices, traditions and arts. At the same time, an assessment of the relationship between the Malays and Chinese, as presented in historiographical works, reveal many mythical elements whose existence requires explanation. This raises many questions concerning the existence of Chinese personages and Chinese presence in Malay historical writings, and to what the extent these accounts are true. This article will discuss these issues by examining selected historiographical works in Malay literature and related historical records. The discussion is based on an intercultural approach to Malay literature and its relevance to the present time.

Keywords: China, Malay historiography, charm, personage, intercultural

Abstrak

Karya historiografi menjadi sumber penting bagi mengesan interaksi awal orang Melayu dengan China dalam bentuk penampilan watak-watak yang memiliki personanya yang tersendiri. Pengetahuan masyarakat Melayu tentang keadaan negara China turut dicitrakan pengarang melalui deskripsi amalan adat istiadat, kebudayaan dan

kesenian masyarakat China yang mempesonakan pembaca. Pada masa yang sama, penilaian terhadap kisah hubungan Melayu dengan China dalam karya historiografi memperlihatkan banyak unsur mitos yang perlu diberikan penjelasan akan kewujudannya. Hal ini menimbulkan pelbagai persoalan tentang sebab-sebab kewujudan unsur persona dan pesona masyarakat China dalam penulisan sejarah Melayu dan sejauh mana pula kebenarannya. Makalah akan membincangkan persoalan ini berdasarkan naskhah historiografi Melayu terpilih dan catatan-catatan sejarah yang berkaitan dengannya. Perbincangan adalah berasaskan pendekatan silang budaya dalam konteks kesusasteraan Melayu serta kerelevanannya sehingga ke hari ini.

Kata kunci: China, historiografi Melayu, pesona, persona, silang budaya

INTRODUCTION

For the rest of the world, one of the earliest sources concerning the existence of the Malays and Chinese is *Rihlah Ibn Battutah*, which was written by Ibn Battutah between 1325 and 1354. This work, which belongs to the genre of travelogue literature, recounts Ibn Battutah's travels from Tangier in Morocco to the Islamic holy city of Makkah (Mecca), Persia, East Africa, Asia Minor, India, Sumatra and finally to China before returning to Tangier. In each of the places he visited, Ibn Battutah made various notations about the local community, including people who had a certain persona, and descriptions capturing the charm of an area or event. The English translation of this work was published under the title *The Travels of Ibn Battuta A.D. 1325-1354* by the Hakluyt Society as early as in 1958. In 2003, *Rihlah Ibn Battutah* was translated into Malay language by Syed Nurul Akla Syed Abdullah and Adi Setia Mohd. Dom under the title *Pengembaraan Ibn Battutah* and published by the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) through collaboration with MPH Publishing.

From his time in Samudra-Pasai (in the north of Sumatra), Ibn Battutah tells the story of the religious and generous Sultan al-Malik al-Zahir, who valued religious scholars and would go for prayers at the mosque on foot. When it came time for him to pursue learning, the Sultan removed his royal ceremonial robes and wore the clothes of a religious scholar (Syed Nurul Akla & Adi Setia, 2006: 731-735). In the Malay world at the time, Sultan al-Malik al-Zahir was described as a personage who ruled justly and by adhering strictly to his religious faith.¹ The word "personage" is a term that

suggests a special attribute, uniqueness, greatness or superiority possessed by a personality or figure who is remembered in history and who may be an example or model to be followed by people at all times. In a wider sense, a personage is distinguished by his good looks, excellent manners, skills or knowledge in a certain field and the like.

After his sojourn in Sumatera, Ibn Battutah continued on to India and from there to China. His visit to China is given more space, as it includes various narrations of palace life and the life of the people at the end of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) in China (Syed Nurul Akla & Adi Setia, 2006: 744-765). Several interesting descriptions are also given concerning the lives of Muslims, the special skills of the Chinese in smithing and portraiture, their attention to detail in recording sea voyages and several other descriptions. The charm that is meant here are intriguing descriptions of an area, situation or unusual event that pique the reader's interest to know more about them. The charm of the description will emerge as the writer details an event or situation with elements that have an emotional and aesthetic effect on the reader.



Figure 1 Map of Ibn Battutah's travel across Southeast Asia and China, 1345-1346. [Source: Syed Nurul Akla & Adi Setia, 2006: 849]

Rihlah Ibn Battutah could be an important source in intercultural studies, especially from the perspective of thinking of an Arab traveller in parts of the world that are alien to him. Before Ibn Battutah, the Malays and Chinese also appear in the accounts of Marco Polo (1254–1324), who had travelled to the Islamic kingdom at Perlak in 1292. However, one account that is of no less importance is that of the Chinese imperial records concerning the journeys of Admiral Zheng He (Laksamana Cheng Ho) to the Malay world, which themselves can become a cornerstone of assessing Chinese personages and Chinese presence in historiographical works concerning the Malay world. The Chinese imperial records meant here are the ones recorded by Liang Liji (1996), Wade (1997), Miksic (2014) and others.

MALAY HISTORIOGRAPHY

The history of the relationship between the Malay sultanates and China has been the subject of much research by scholars of history, language, literature and culture, especially in studies of *Sulalatus Salatin* (*Sejarah Melayu*), which can be found, among others, in Liang Liji (1996), Wade (1997), Miksic (2014), Mazura Othman and Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin (2015), Ahmat (2016) and Fu (2017). Liang (1996: 42) provides much information about maritime contact between China and the Malay world, which began 1500 years ago and reached its height in the early Ming Dynasty and the glory days of the Malay sultanate in Melaka (Malacca). In 1402, Emperor Yongle (1402–1424) ascended the throne and opened the door to a relationship with the Malay world by sending out envoys and trade ships. In 1403, a delegation led by Yin Qing was sent to Melaka to meet with Parameswara. The visit by this delegation was well received and reciprocated by sending an envoy from Melaka to return to China with Yin Qing (Liang, 1996: 45).

A larger delegation led by Admiral Zheng He, a Muslim, was sent by China to Melaka in 1405. He undertook seven voyages to the Malay world in the 15th century and visited Melaka several times. He became a well-known figure in the Malay world, accompanied by his scribe, Ma Huan, who was also a Muslim. Around the mid-15th century, several Chinese delegations led by “men of the Islamic faith” came to Melaka (Miksic, 2014: 192). The history of diplomatic relations between Melaka and China that occurred between 1403 and 1521 are still important records, and have been transcribed and recompiled by Liang (1996: 63-76). As many as three Melakan kings are listed as having visited China: Parameswara (Iskandar Syah) in 1411, Megat Iskandar Syah in 1419 and Sultan Muhammad Syah in 1424, 1433 and 1434.

The arrival of delegations and trade missions from China to the Malay world also received attention from writers in the palaces of the Malay sultanates. Their writings fit in more with the concept of historiography, a form of writing about history as understood by the palace writers at the time, at whose core lies the tradition of literature and history. In this article, the intercultural study of the Malays and Chinese is aimed at tracing the kinds of interactions that took place between the two cultures, the pre-eminence of one over the other and the similarities between them, as well as discussing differences or issues—if any—especially in matters concerning literature.

INTERCULTURAL PERSONAGES AND CHINESE PRESENCE

In *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, there is the tale of a princess of Majapahit called Tuan Puteri Gemerenging, who asks a palace portrait artist named Tun Perpatih Cina to travel to various countries and draw the faces of the princes he meet there. The artist carries out her wish and draws the faces of over 100 princes, including that of Tun Abdul Jalil from Pasai. None of the portraits are attractive to Tuan Puteri Gemerenging, except for that of Tun Abdul Jalil, which immediately raises feelings of passion in her. Without wasting any time, Tuan Puteri Gemerenging sails to Pasai to meet the prince who had stolen her heart. However, her arrival incurs the wrath of the King of Pasai, who decrees that his son be put to death. The death of Tun Abdul Jalil causes Majapahit to attack Pasai, and results in the King of Pasai abandoning his throne and country, and fleeing into exile.

Hikayat Raja Pasai is a Malay historiographical work dating back to the 15th century and was published by Russel Jones in 1987. A more recent version of the work was edited by Ahmat Adam (2019) and published by SIRD in Petaling Jaya, Selangor. The Pasai mentioned in this *hikayat* was in Samudra-Pasai, a kingdom that had been visited by Ibn Battutah, as described in his *Rihlah Ibn Battutah*. The tale of the princess Tuan Puteri Gemerenging mentioned above has its own charm as it is unique and makes for an interesting reading. At the same time, the tale also presents a Chinese character that is no less interesting: Tun Perpatih Cina, an excellent portrait artist. Perhaps, he was such a famous artist at the time that he was counted on by the princess to travel all over the region in order to paint portraits of princes.² Although Majapahit was a large Javanese kingdom, it still depended on the skills of a Chinese portrait painter.

The truth behind the story and origin of Tun Perpatih Cina at the royal court of Majapahit is difficult to corroborate with evidence. However, as

mentioned earlier, Chinese delegations had long before reached Majapahit and it is not impossible that a skilled Chinese painter may have been left behind by them to remain in Majapahit. The skills of Chinese painters were not a mere myth, and was part and parcel of Chinese culture. This was attested by Ibn Battutah during his sojourn in China, where he himself witnessed the skills of Chinese portrait painters. From a literary angle, Tun Perpatih Cina's skills at drawing portraits are ones that must be possessed by a palace artist; he is thus able to carry out the tasks given to him by the palace. From an intercultural angle, Tun Perpatih Cina's skills at portraiture are a part of Chinese heritage, which is, among others, mentioned in the writings of Ibn Battutah (Syed Nurul Akla & Adi Setia, 2006: 747):

Penduduk China ialah masyarakat yang memiliki kemahiran paling tinggi dalam pelbagai seni pertukangan. Selain itu, mereka juga sangat teliti dalam melakukan kerja-kerja tersebut. Keistimewaan mereka ini sangat masyhur dan dimaklumi umum. Orang ramai telah mengarang dan menyebut tentang hal ini dalam karya-karya mereka dengan panjang lebar. Begitu juga lukisan. Tiada siapa yang boleh menandingi mereka, sama ada orang Rom ataupun selainnya. Kemahiran penduduk China dalam bidang ini begitu tinggi dan sangat ketara. Antara perkara ajaib yang kulihat berhubung dengan kemahiran melukis mereka ini adalah apabila aku memasuki salah sebuah kota dan kemudian kembali semula ke situ, aku mendapati potret diriku serta sahabat-sahabatku terlukis pada kertas. Malah, mereka juga mempamerkannya di bazar-bazar. Aku telah masuk ke kota sultan dan melawati bazar pelukis. Aku akhirnya sampai di istana sultan bersama-sama dengan sahabat-sahabatku. Kami memakai pakaian ala orang Iraq. Apabila aku kembali dari istana pada waktu malam, aku melewati bazar yang diceritakan itu. Kulihat gambarku serta sahabat-sahabatku dilukis pada kertas dan mereka menggantungkannya pada dinding. Setiap orang daripada kami meneliti gambar sahabat masing-masing dan mendapati gambar tersebut saling tak tumpah seperti wajahnya.

[The Chinese possess an unusually high skill in all kinds of crafts. Apart from this, they are also meticulous in doing this work. They are renowned for this far and wide. People have written and talked about this in their works at length. The same goes for painting. No one can match them, not the Romans or anyone else. The Chinese people's skill in this field is very great and very obvious. Among the amazing things that I saw happened when I entered a city. When I returned, there was

my portrait, and those of my companions, drawn on paper. In fact, they were displayed in the bazaars.

I went into the sultan's city and visited the painters' bazaar. I finally arrived at the palace with my companions. We were dressed in clothing akin to those of the people of Iraq. When I returned from the palace at night, I passed the bazaar mentioned earlier. I saw my picture and those of my companions drawn on paper and hung on the wall. Each one of us looked at his picture and found that it was a remarkable likeness.]

The tale told in *Hikayat Raja Pasai* is somewhat similar to a tale found in *Hikayat Banjar*, another Malay historiographical work produced around the 15th century. An early edition of *Hikayat Banjar* was published by J. J. Ras in Dutch in 1968 and later translated into Malay by Siti Hawa Haji Salleh (1990). It tells about the kings of Negara-Dipa who are in need of excellent craftsmen to make bronze statues for placing in the royal temples. As there were no skilled craftsmen in the kingdom, the King orders a delegation to be sent to China under the leadership of a nobleman named Wiramartas, who could speak Chinese.³ The delegation from Negara-Dipa is received warmly, with full pomp and ceremony, by the Emperor of China, and this is given an interesting description. The *hikayat* tells that the Emperor of China himself, together with 4000 of his ministers and 1000 concubines, receive the delegation. The request by the delegation from Negara-Dipa is fulfilled by the Emperor; he sends 10 skilled craftsmen to Negara-Dipa to make statues for the temples (Siti Hawa, 1990: 231-234).

The tale recorded in *Hikayat Banjar* may contain exaggerations and myths in order to glorify the kingdom of Negara-Dipa through charming descriptions that intrigue the reader. At the same time, the action of the king of Negara-Dipa—sending a Chinese-speaking envoy to China—is an important element of diplomacy. Wiramartas, the Chinese-speaking nobleman who is received with warmth and honour by the Emperor of China, is the personage who brought about the success of the mission. The King of Negara-Dipa is also seen as understanding the importance of intercultural political ties, based on which he establishes good relations with China. The 10 Chinese craftsmen then produce two bronze statues that are placed in the royal temple. In his *Rihlah Ibn Battutah*, Ibn Battutah, too, praises the skills of Chinese craftsmen, including their skills at building temples.

Within the group of Malay historiographical writings, *Sulalatus Salatin* (*Sejarah Melayu*) has a special place as one of the Malay masterpieces, as it is rich in all kinds of information concerning the early contact between

the Malays and Chinese. The work, composed by Tun Seri Lanang at Batu Sawar in Johor Lama in 1612, exists in several versions that differ slightly from one to another. It begins with the conquering of the world by the Roman (Byzantine) Raja Iskandar Zulkarnain of Macedonia, who conquers lands all the way to what is identified as the land of the Kalinga (i.e. India). This mission to conquer the world is continued by one of his sons called Raja Suran, who arrives in Temasik while on his way to launch an attack on China. The news reaches the Emperor of China, who then orders his Prime Minister to mount a strategy for warding off the attack; a boat is filled with rusty needles, fruiting trees, and a toothless old man to show how far China is from Temasik (A. Samad Ahmad, 1996: 13-14). As a result, Raja Suran decides not to attack China.

This part of the tale is not included in Chinese documents (Liang Liji, 1996) and is clearly a myth. However, in the context of literature, this incident is a means to display the wisdom of the Emperor of China to avoid a war. A strong enemy can be weakened through the correct strategy. By avoiding a war with India, China thus remains free to extend its influence in the Malay world. Later, the Sultan of Melaka prevents an attack by the Siamese by having good relations with China. Melaka continues in this vein, which results in ongoing friendly relations between Melaka and China.

The episode begins with the recounting of how the Emperor of China sent an emissary to Melaka in a boat filled with needles, symbolizing the great number of people that made up the population of China (A. Samad Ahmad, 1996: 131-137). The arrival of the envoy is received with pomp and splendour by Sultan Mansur Syah. In his missive to the Sultan of Melaka, the Emperor writes, among other things, “Kita pun daripada anak cucu Raja Iskandar Zulkarnain, sebangsa juga dengan raja Melaka” [“We, too, are descended from King Iskandar Zulqarnain, and of the same tribe as the people of Melaka”]. When the time comes for the envoy to return home, Sultan Mansur Syah decrees that Tun Perpatih Putih (the younger brother of Bendahara Tun Perak) travel to China as Melaka’s envoy to China; the boat is filled with roasted sago pearls, symbolizing the extent of the Melakan populace.⁴

The description of the arrival of the Chinese envoy in Melaka is a display of several cultural and civilizational values from both sides. China’s desire to show its immensity is symbolically represented by the large number of needles gifted to the Sultan of Melaka. The Malays, on the other hand, not wishing to be left behind, send roasted sago pearls—symbolizing the uniqueness of the inhabitants of the Malay world—in return, as a means to defend their own status. While in China, Tun Perpatih Putih again shows

his wisdom and wit when meeting with the Prime Minister, Li Po, and even outsmarts the Chinese by requesting to be served *kangkong* (water spinach) cut lengthwise in order to be able to look at the face of the Emperor of China. The Melakan envoy does not return empty-handed, however, as he returns in the company of Minister Lak Di Po and the princess Hang Liu as a bride for Sultan Mansur Syah, in addition to an entourage of 1000 people. Ultimately, the two cultures become one through the bond of marriage.

After returning to China, Minister Lak Di Po delivers a missive from the Sultan of Melaka, as son-in-law of the Emperor of China. Unfortunately, two days later, the Emperor suffers from an attack of leprosy, and his whole body is itchy as a result. An old doctor advises that the only cure is the water used by the Sultan of Melaka to wash his feet (A. Samad Ahmad, 1996: 136). The envoy is quickly dispatched to Melaka to obtain the water. The Emperor of China is only cured after drinking, bathing and washing his face with this water. The Emperor then makes a vow (A. Samad Ahmad, 1996: 137):

“Segala anak cucu kita jangan lagi berkehendak disembah raja Melaka datang kepada anak cucu raja Melaka, kadar muafakat berkasih-kasihian jua”

[“All our children and grandchildren should not require the sultan of Melaka to pay obeisance to them, even his children and grandchildren; let us all be friends and value each other equally”].

The accounts of Malay–Chinese relations described above have their origins in certain historical events but are interwoven with myth. According to Liang Liji (1996: 69-71), Sultan Mansur Syah did send envoys to China as many as four times: in 1459, 1468, 1469 and 1475. All the envoys were warmly received, were celebrated with feasts and given a large number of gifts. The Emperor of China also sent envoys to Melaka several times, including once in 1459 as a token of recognition for the reign of Sultan Mansur Syah. However, events such as the Chinese sending a boat full of needles, or the names “Minister Li Po” or “Lak Di Po” and “Princess Hang Liao” and even the incident concerning the Emperor of China being struck with leprosy are nowhere to be found in Chinese imperial records.

According to Chinese records, relations with Melaka began in 1403 when the Emperor of China sent a delegation headed by Minister Yin Qing to “merayu raja Melaka bersahabat dengan Dinasti Ming” [“beg the king of Melaka to have friendly relations with the Ming Dynasty”] (Liang, 1996:

Table 1 Brief account of Melaka–China relations in the time of Sultan Mansur Syah.

Year	From Melaka to China	From China to Melaka
1459	Tribute items: Envoys were given a feast, a <i>songkok</i> (headdress), sash belt, a suit of brocade silk, satin, etc.	Minister Chen Jia Lou and his deputy Peng Sheng were sent to Melaka. A missive from the Emperor of China gave recognition to Sultan Mansur Syah.
1468	Minister Ba La Si and interpreter Wu Sha brought with them elephant and turtle items, etc. Envoys were presented with headdresses, sash belts, clothing, silks, etc.	-
1469	Envoy Duan Ya Ma La Di Na Cha took with him items of tribute. Envoys were given a feast, brocade silk, clothing, etc.	-
1475	Envoy Duan Ma Mi took with him an epistle on gold leaf, elephants, horses, turkeys, white lorikeets, clouded leopards, etc. Envoys were given a feast and awarded ceremonial clothing, brocade silk, etc. as well as a letter by the Emperor, praising the Sultan of Melaka.	-

[Source: Liang, 1996: 69-71]

63).⁵ In 1405, Raja Parameswara sent an envoy to accompany Minister Yin Qing back to China and, thus, began relations between Melaka and China through the paying of tribute to China. In 1408, Admiral Zheng He arrived in Melaka. Following this visit, in 1411, Parameswara and his wives and ministers—an entourage of 540 people—went to China and were received with great pomp. In 1412, Zheng He once again visited Melaka and in 1413, a Melakan envoy once again visited China.

There are several important records about the relationship between Parameswara and Emperor Yong Le in China. According to Liang Liji (1996: 44-48), the departure of the delegation headed by Minister Yin Qing in 1403 was a great event in Melaka at the time. Similarly, the arrival of Admiral Zheng He in 1405, with his fleet of 200 ships carrying as many as 28 000 people, was equally spectacular. Zheng He was considered a great Chinese personage at the time, and his armada would have been beyond anything that had been seen before. Unfortunately, the author of *Sulalatus Salatin* does not give much attention to Zheng He and his armada. The account of Parameswara meeting Zheng He is also not recorded here. On the contrary, Malay historiography focuses more on the glory days of Melaka under the reign of Sultan Mansur Syah, who is said to have married Princess Hang Liu.

From a literary standpoint, *Sulalatus Salatin* records personages and intriguing events in the early relations between the Malays and Chinese that are presented not through power relations, but instead on mutual understanding and respect, and the creation of an intercultural network between both countries that has withstood the test of time even until today. The paying of tribute to China by Melaka is told by the author of *Sulalatus Salatin* through charming tales that are sharply—though almost imperceptibly—critical. The truth concerning these events is doubtful. However, something that is not found in Chinese records does not necessarily mean it never happened, where Malay–Chinese relations are concerned.

Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa, a historiographical work concerning the sultanate of Kedah in the 18th century, and which begins with a myth whose real background is difficult to determine, makes use of metaphors and symbolism. The *hikayat* begins with the tale of a Roman (Byzantine) prince wishing to wed a daughter of the Emperor of China, but his efforts are thwarted by the large, mythical *geroda* bird (Siti Hawa, 1991: 3-24). The Chinese princess is kidnapped by the *geroda* and is hidden on the island of Langkapuri. The prince, accompanied by Raja Merong Mahawangsa, is lost at sea as a result of being attacked by the *geroda*. While in captivity, the Chinese princess displays her excellent character and manners and, in the end, is able to meet the Byzantine prince who has drifted to Langkapuri. There is a long-winded description about the situation at the court of the Emperor of China when the *geroda* goes to China. The Byzantine prince in the end marries the Chinese princess, and Raja Merong Mahawangsa goes on to establish his kingdom at Langkasuka.

The beginning of the tale recounted in *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* is a myth filled with unusual and magical elements, but it still contains some

intriguing details. The greatness of two empires—that of Rome (Byzantium) and China—meet in a Malay historiographical work of the 18th century CE. The two vast empires, one in the East and the other in the West, at first fail to come together due to the interference of the mythical *geroda*. If the dragon is the mythical animal associated with Chinese culture, then the *geroda* is the mythical animal of the Malays. However, in the end, it is the Chinese princess and the Byzantine prince's respective excellent character and wit that allow them to overcome all obstacles—in line with the predictions of Prophet Solomon that matches are made by God and will be made anywhere in the world. Several aspects can be related to this episode, including the possibility that the author may have been inspired by the travels of Raja Iskandar Zulkarnain as a Roman prince from Macedonia, as described in *Sulalatus Salatin*. Apart from this, the tale may also have been influenced by the history of Marco Polo's travels to China at the beginning of the 14th century.

Compared to the other historiographical works that have been discussed, *Silsilah Raja-Raja Berunai* presents several events concerning contact between the Malays of Brunei and China. The accounts of these events are unique and varied in their own way. Officially, the Brunei sultanate began with the reign of Sultan Muhammad Shah, who reigned from around 1363 to 1402. After his demise, Brunei was ruled by his brother, Sultan Ahmad (Awang Patih Berbai), whose reign extended from 1408 to 1425. Sultan Ahmad is said to have married the sister of Ong Sum Ping, a court minister in China. Ong Sum Ping himself was appointed to a position at court and given the title “Pengiran Maharaja Lela”. Next, the throne went to Sharif Ali, Sultan Ahmad's son-in-law who hailed from Taif. Sharif Ali reigned from 1425 to 1432. The period of the early Bruneian sultanate overlaps with the emergence of the Melakan sultanate, and falls within the time of the reign of Emperor Yongle in China (1402-1424).

The history of the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam, as briefly explained above, has its similarities and differences with the historiographical work titled *Silsilah Raja-Raja Berunai*. The writing of this work was started by Datu Imam Yaakub, and dated October 24, 1735. Imam Yaakub left it incomplete, and the work was later completed by Haji Abdul Latif and dated February 10, 1807. The earliest published version of the *Silsilah Raja-Raja Berunai* manuscript was undertaken by P. L. Amin Sweeney in 1968; it was later republished in 1998.

At the beginning of this work comes the account of a Bruneian ruler named Awang Khalak Betatar, who changes his name to Sultan Muhammad

and marries the niece of the Emperor of China from among the local Chinese settlers known as “Cina Batangan”. Then, there is an account of two ministers sent by the Emperor of China to Brunei to retrieve the dragon’s magic pearl: one, an old man named Ong Bong Kong; the other being Ong Sum Ping. Ong Sum Ping successfully kills the dragon and obtains the magic pearl. A dispute breaks out between the two and, in the end, Ong Bong Kong returns to China, bringing the dragon’s pearl with him. Disappointed, Ong Sum Ping remains in Brunei and marries Sultan Muhammad’s daughter. Ong Sum Ping later becomes the second Sultan of Brunei, taking the name Sultan Ahmad. Not long afterwards, a Muslim proselytizer by the name of Sharif Ali comes to Brunei from Taif and marries Sultan Ahmad’s daughter. Upon the death of Sultan Ahmad, Sharif Ali becomes the third Sultan of Brunei, using the name Sultan Berkat.

Based on historical writings and the genealogy above, it is clear that Ong Sum Ping was a major Chinese personage in the Bruneian palace at one point in time. Although his life story varies from one version to another—at times he is mentioned as having been the sultan, at others he is a nobleman—he clearly had a place in the royal court and the royal family can trace its ancestry to him. The tale about his courage and wit as he successfully obtains the dragon’s pearl and surrenders it to his brother, Ong Bong Kong, shows that he is a person of good character and who receives recognition for it in the history of Brunei. This is not an isolated case unique to Brunei Darussalam. Instead, throughout history, the Malay rulers have created alliances with people of Indian, Arab, Javanese, Buginese and Achenese descent, among others. Anyone who displayed good etiquette and an outstanding persona was given the opportunity to serve at the palace, and could even be promoted to be ruler or minister of a kingdom in the Malay world.⁶

A close study of Malay historiographical works reveals that not all record Chinese presence in the Malay world. Works such as *Salasilah Kutai* (15th century), *Hikayat Aceh* (17th century), *Hikayat Seri Kelantan* (19th century) and *Hikayat Johor* (19th century) do not record any events involving the Chinese. *Hikayat Pahang* does contain some brief descriptions about Chinese involvement in resisting the British, including the role played by Kapitan Yap Ah Loy in Kuala Lumpur. Yap Ah Loy is another Chinese personage who plays an important part in the history of the development of Kuala Lumpur. However, he does not really stand out as a personage in *Hikayat Pahang*.

Hikayat Misa Melayu, a work composed at the royal court of Perak in the 18th century, contains some descriptions about Chinese settlers living in Perak at the time. Their presence is apparently peaceful and some of their

cultural practices, such as musical arts, dragon dance and the like, are also mentioned. *Hikayat Patani*, which was authored in the early 18th century, contains a brief account of a Chinese ship captain gifting the Raja (king) of Patani a large stone cannonball. Unfortunately, the Raja is embarrassed by the gift as there is no cannon in Patani that is large enough for the cannonball he has been given. Consequently, he forbids his people from trading copper with other countries because copper can be made into cannons.

Here, it is also important to mention *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, which is a Malay epic that has strong links with the historiographical *Sulalatus Salatin*. It is narrated in *Hikayat Hang Tuah* that the eponymous hero was able to master Malay, Arabic, Tamil, Thai, Javanese, Chinese as well as other languages. From the time he was a child, Hang Tuah is said to have studied Chinese until he gained fluency in the language—his tutor having been a Chinese *lebai* (someone learned in Islam) (Kassim Ahmad, 1997: 23). As an adult, Hang Tuah is sent to be the envoy for the Sultan of Melaka on missions to Pasai, Patani, Siam, India and Turkey. While in India, the king of India makes Hang Tuah his emissary to China. Hang Tuah reaches China to a warm welcome by the Emperor of China; he remains in China for two months. Regarding intercultural aspects, then, Hang Tuah's fluency in Chinese is an important factor for his success in China, especially when dealing with the etiquette and cultural practices of the Chinese. The tale is very similar to the account recorded in *Rihlah Ibn Battutah*, whereby Ibn Battutah goes to India and is then sent by the king of India to be his envoy to China.

Recently, there has been the view that Hang Tuah was Chinese based on his name “Hang”, which is taken to be of Chinese origin, such as in the name of the princess Hang Liu. This is mere conjecture. *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Kassim Ahmad, 1997: 22) records that Hang Tuah is the son of Hang Mahmud and Dang Merdu, who are residents of Sungai Duyung (presumably in Melaka). Claims made in *Sulalatus Salatin* (A. Samad Ahmad, 1996: 103-105) state that Hang Tuah was a 12-year-old boy from Goa, Sulawesi, who was presented to Sultan Mansur Syah. His name is said to have been Daeng Mempawah, the son of Raja Bajung, and he is said to have been given the moniker “Hang Tuah” by Sultan Mansur Syah himself. Prior to this, Sultan Mansur Syah had already awarded the title “Hang” to eight others, which was a royal honour bestowed by the Sultan at the time.⁷ Hang Tuah became the ninth person in the *perhangan* (people awarded the title “Hang”). It is greatly possible that the Chinese princess, Hang Liu, also only used this name once in Melaka.

Tun Seri Lanang's writings about the origin of Hang Tuah in *Sulalatus Salatin* seem to be the most believable: that Hang Tuah was Buginese and

that he had been awarded the title “Hang”, not that he was of Chinese descent. In the history of Malay sultanate, Hang Tuah is a rather special personage. Although *Sulalatus Salatin* does not record Hang Tuah ever travelling to Siam, India, China, Turkey and other countries, these, as well as his travels to China, are recorded in the great Malay epic, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, which is filled with legendary tales about the hero. The name “Hang Tuah” or that of princess Hang Liu also do not appear in any Chinese records (Liang, 1996).

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The historiographical works from the 15th to the 18th centuries depict a harmonious relationship between the Malays and Chinese. The latter was seen as a major power for protection, friendship, all kinds of knowledge transfer, trade and the like. There is never any record that China ever launched any military attack on any Malay state. There are also no incidents of palace upheaval being caused by or involving Chinese courtiers. On the other hand, enemies are shown to come from India or Majapahit, or are Portuguese or Dutch. In *Hikayat Seri Kelantan*, there is the account of a long drawn-out war between the rulers of Kelantan and the Siamese. In *Sulalatus Salatin*, Singapore is destroyed by the Javanese from Majapahit, while in its early days, Melaka is under threat from the Siamese. The weakening and eventual downfall of Melaka, as described in *Sulalatus Salatin*, is usually ascribed to the role played by Javanese courtiers who are envious and treacherous, as well as Tamil Muslims who become involved in rumour-mongering and widespread corruption.

Were Chinese personages and the Chinese presence in the Malay sultanates truly harmonious in nature? This question requires a more detailed look into history, in the future. The records show that Admiral Zheng He explored the outside world seven times, and visited Melaka on several of those occasions. Zheng He remains an eminent Chinese personage in the Malay world to this day. However, the writers of the Malay royal courts did not say anything about his presence. According to Miksic (2014: 193), while in Palembang, Zheng He became involved in a big battle, in which 5000 Chinese were killed.⁸ Unfortunately, this battle does not appear in Malay historiography.

Through the study of Malay historiographical manuscripts, it becomes clear that Chinese personages and the Chinese presence were indeed harmonious in nature, as they gave rise to mutually respectful intercultural relations between the two countries. China, being the superior power, constantly sent emissaries to the Malay world, providing help when necessary and facilitating

interracial marriages with Malay rulers. Although China was far off and few Malays ever set foot in China, descriptions of Chinese personages and the Chinese presence recorded in historiographical works were able to provide a variety of depictions of the personalities and conditions of the Chinese in the Malay community.

The situation may differ somewhat when looking at Malay historiographical works that were produced later in the 19th and 20th centuries, such as *Tuhfat al-Nafis* and *Hikayat Siak*. In these periods, the Chinese had become more competitive and monopolized business and trade, to the extent that conflict broke out within the Chinese community, and there was enmity between the Chinese and the local populace, or between the Chinese and the Western colonial powers. All of this became a part of the historical socioeconomic and political reality in the Malay world, resulting in several bloody skirmishes due to business rivalry, attempts to control mining, land ownership disputes and the like. Some events also received the attention of palace writers in the production of later historiographical works.

For example, in *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, Raja Ali Haji notes the large number of Chinese trading ships at the port in Riau in the mid-19th century, vying for business in competition with the locals. *Hikayat Siak* records that the Chinese become increasingly stiff competition in business and trade, to the extent that armed conflict breaks out between them and the local populace, who are supported by the Dutch. In Pontianak, for example, the local army, together with the Dutch, face off against a Chinese army that is 2000 strong (Muhammad Yusoff, 1992: 266).

One other example can be found in Muhammad Hassan's *Al-Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah* (1927). This historiographical work tells the account of a Chinese blacksmith named Lim Chok, who became a successful cauldron and wok merchant in the area around Kulim in Kedah. He features as a Chinese personage in the blacksmithing industry in Kedah at the time. At the same time, the same work explains how the Chinese secret societies in Kulim were in conflict as a result of business rivalry. The conflict was overcome when the leaders of these secret societies were caught and punished.

An example of the relations between the Malays and Chinese emerges in the historiographical *syair*, a Malay poetic form, such as in *Syair Perang Cina di Monterado*. This *syair*, which was published through the effort of Arena Wati in 1989, tells about a war between the Chinese and local rulers and citizens (Malays and Dayaks) that took place in Monterado, an area in West Kalimantan, at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. In the early stages, the arrival of the Chinese was nothing less than beneficial

to the local rulers because of their skill in goldmining. However, over time, the number of Chinese settlers increased and their support of their own *kongsi* (clan) leaders caused unease among the Malays and Dayaks, finally resulting in a war and terrible bloodshed (Alezender & Shaiful Bahri, 2020). In this war, the local people were aided by the Dutch to defeat the Chinese.

Any war will lead to destruction of property and leave psychological scars on people who experience it. Descriptions of war are not the place for beautiful personages and charming presences that readers can appreciate. Instead, wars will paralyze people due to their ugliness and violence. Tales of war do not belong to the genre of etiquette literature because they are grounded in greed, monopolization and avarice. Episodes about wars can, however, be featured in etiquette literature if they involve efforts to defend one's motherland and faith. In *Syair Perang Cina di Monterado*, the Chinese are insulted, humiliated and reviled using terms that have never before been found in any other Malay historiography.

CONCLUSION

To this day, historiographical works produced by palace writers in the Malay sultanates remain relevant as original resources whose explicit and implicit meanings must be interpreted according to the contexts of their time. Apart from the historical aspects, historiographical works are rich in intercultural elements concerning the Malays and their relationships with other communities. The Chinese personages and the Chinese presence, as presented in these works, show the attitude towards the Chinese in the Malay world from around the 14th to the 18th centuries. *Sulalatus Salatin* (*Sejarah Melayu*) and *Silsilah Raja-Raja Berunai* are works that best display the Chinese personages and presence, and are rich in intercultural elements. The following three conclusions can be arrived at through the present study.

Firstly, the early historiographical writings tend to present Chinese characters and China as being harmonious according to the understanding of the Malays. China was a protector, friend and source of expertise without any conflict, upheaval or war. This is different from the tale of the coming of Raja Suran from India, or the armies of Majapahit or Siam, which were a constant threat to the Malay sultanates. Much of this has to do with the history of the relationship between China and the Malay world beginning in 1403, whereby both were more concerned with exploration, trade and friendship, and not war or annexation. The Chinese who came to the Malay world at the time came under the protection of the Malay rulers.

Secondly, the Chinese did not interfere with the politics of the Malay states, unlike the Indians, Arabs or Javanese. Therefore, there are no records of internal conflict in the Malay sultanates involving Chinese courtiers. However, in later times, with more involvement in business and trade by the Chinese under the protection of secret societies, wars and enmity ensued, involving the local populace and the Portuguese, Dutch or British colonial powers. Monopolies in business and trade resulted in all kinds of competition that, in turn, were destructive to the harmonious life of the various ethnic groups in the Malay world.

Thirdly, more studies and translations of works of literature from the past should be undertaken in order to uncover the explicit and implicit meanings thought of by the authors of the past, and reassessing the historical effect of intercultural contact in the Malay world. Studies should encompass all kinds of sources, including literary works aimed at enhancing the quality of one's personality, to lead towards a better and more civilized life. More attention should be given to Admiral Zheng He (Laksamana Cheng Ho), who came to the Malay world several times and made many contributions. Zheng He and his scribe, Ma Huan, are two great personages and presences in Malay–Chinese relations who should continue to be discussed by people across cultures, ethnicities and religious beliefs. Intercultural understanding between the Malays and Chinese were forged long ago, and examples still exist to ensure harmony and sustainability in 21st century Malaysia.

NOTES

1. In his journey home to Tangier, Ibn Battutah stayed in Samudra-Pasai for two months, receiving all kinds of benefactions from Sultan al-Malik al-Zahir, including being able to witness the wedding of the Sultan's son according to the local customs. In his travels to China, Ibn Battutah passed the Straits of Malacca but he did not record landing in Melaka, either because Melaka did not exist yet or was still very much undeveloped between 1345 and 1346 CE. Tales concerning Sultan al-Malik al-Zahir are recorded in *Hikayat Raja Pasai*.
2. Based on his name, Tun Perpatih Cina is likely to have been Chinese and was given a position of eminence at the palace of Majapahit. However, the title "Tun" is something of a mystery, suggesting that he could have been from Pasai, where the title "Tun" was already in use at the time.
3. Negara-Dipa was an ancient kingdom in Kalimantan under the influence of Majapahit. "Wiramarta" is a title given to courtiers.
4. Roasted sago—the round pearls found in the trunks of the sago palm—were a food commonly eaten in the Malay world.

5. This excerpt of the Chinese records corresponds to the narration in *Sulalatus Salatin* because, according to the author of *Sulalatus Salatin*, the Emperor of China was the one who initiated contact with Melaka. However, the claim that the arrival of the Chinese began in the time of Sultan Mansur Syah is inconsistent with the history of relations between Melaka and China.
6. In historical texts about Brunei Darussalam, a ruler of Brunei is said to have visited China in 1408 during the time of Emperor Yung Lo (Yong Le, 1402-1424). The ruler was given an official welcome at the Imperial Palace. A month later, the ruler fell ill and passed away while there, at the age of 28. Traces of the tomb of the Bruneian ruler are still evident to this day in the Nanking region. However, the identity of this ruler cannot be ascertained with any certainty (see Tun Mohamed Sufian, 1998).
7. “Hang Jebat dan Hang Kasturi, dan Hang Lekir, dan Hang Lekiu, dan Hang Ali dan Hang Iskandar, dan Hang Hassan, dan Hang Hussain, dan tua-tuanya Tun Bija Sura, menjadi sembilan dengan Hang Tuah” (A. Samad Ahmad, 1996: 105). Through this excerpt, it can be deduced that “Hang” was a Malay title, and that among these nine people, Tun Bija Sura was the oldest and perhaps the one who acted as the leader of the perhangan.
8. There were some Chinese in Palembang who tended to interfere with the trade routes of ships that were led by Mongols, as the Mongols were not on the same page as the Ming Dynasty in China. One of the expeditions of Admiral Zheng He was to curb Chinese piracy in the Malay world.

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