

RETURN TO THE *PURBA* DAYS: RESTORATIVE NOSTALGIA AND MAHATHIR'S ERA OF NATIONALISM IN *TUAH* (1989)

**(Kembali ke Purba: Nostalgia Restoratif dan Nasionalisme Era Mahathir dalam
Tuah 1989)**

Adam Muhammad Taufiq Mohamad Suharto
adamtaufiqsuharto@gmail.com

Fakulti Filem, Teater dan Animasi, Kampus Puncak Perdana, Universiti Teknologi
MARA, 40150 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.

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Abstract

Past research concerning Malaysian cinema has predominantly focused on themes of gender, identity, and modernity. As a result, the exploration of nostalgia's function in Malaysian films receives little attention. This study seeks to fill this gap by analysing the discourse of nostalgia in the post-studio era of Malaysian cinema (1975–1999). The primary objective of this study is to examine the role of nostalgia in the film *Tuah* (Anwardi Jamil, 1989), particularly its tribute to the *purba* film, which was a genre of Malay period costume dramas that gained popularity during the studio era from the 1940s to the 1970s. Methodologically, the study employs textual analyses, paying close attention to narrative-visual strategies and historical contexts. Svetlana Boym's (2001) concept of restorative nostalgia provides the theoretical framework, facilitating an exploration of how the film reconstructs and idealises the golden age of the Malacca Sultanate as well as the legendary figure of Hang Tuah as forms of restorative nostalgia. The findings indicate that *Tuah's* romanticised portrayal of the past aligns with the nationalist ideology during Mahathir Mohamad's first administration as the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981–2003). This study's significance lies in its

capacity to position Malaysian cinema within broader discourses on nostalgia as well as the portrayal of Hang Tuah in Malaysian cinema.

Keywords: Malaysian cinema, time travel, Hang Tuah, Malacca, restorative nostalgia, nationalism

Abstrak

Kajian lepas berkenaan sinema Malaysia secara dominannya lebih berfokus kepada tema-tema gender, identiti, dan kemodenan. Namun demikian, penerokaan terhadap fungsi nostalgia dalam filem-filem Malaysia masih kurang mendapat perhatian. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengisi kelompongan tersebut dengan menganalisis wacana nostalgia dalam sinema Malaysia era pascastudio (1975–1999). Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk meneliti peranan nostalgia dalam filem Tuah (Anwardi Jamil, 1989), dengan tribute terhadap filem purba, iaitu genre filem drama kostum zaman silam Melayu yang mencapai populariti semasa era studio dari tahun 1940-an hingga 1970-an. Dari segi metodologi, kajian ini menggunakan analisis tekstual dengan memberikan perhatian kepada strategi naratif-visual serta konteks sejarah. Konsep restoratif nostalgia yang diperkenalkan oleh Svetlana Boym (2001) dijadikan kerangka teori bagi meneroka bagaimana filem ini membina semula dan mengidealkan zaman kegemilangan Kesultanan Melaka serta figura legenda Hang Tuah sebagai bentuk nostalgia restoratif. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa gambaran romantis terhadap masa lalu dalam Tuah memiliki keselarisan dengan ideologi nasionalisme semasa pentadbiran pertama Mahathir Mohamad sebagai Perdana Menteri Malaysia keempat (1981–2003). Kepentingan kajian ini terletak pada keupayaannya untuk meletakkan sinema Malaysia dalam wacana yang lebih luas, yakni berkenaan nostalgia dan pemaparan Hang Tuah dalam sinema Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Sinema Malaysia, kembara masa, Hang Tuah, Melaka, nostalgia restoratif, nasionalisme

INTRODUCTION

In Ismail Embong's painting titled *Mentor*, Mahathir Mohamad; who served as both the fourth and seventh Prime Minister of Malaysia and is widely recognised as the country's Father of Modernisation; is depicted wearing a traditional Malay shirt, known as *baju Melayu*. He is shown performing *perasap keris*, a ritual associated with the traditional Malay dagger called *keris* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, UMNO, & GAPENA, 1994:22). In this artwork, Mahathir hovers the *keris* above a ritual pyre that contains *kemenyan*, a substance traditionally utilised in Malay magical practices. This painting can be interpreted as symbolising a revival of Malay nationalism in the contemporary context. It also reflects the inherent paradox within Mahathir himself; a figure representing modernity yet simultaneously promoting conservative values

to establish hegemony. This theme resonates with time travel narratives from the first Mahathir administration era, particularly in the film *Tuah* (1989) directed by Anwardi Jamil, which will be analysed in this article.

In *Tuah*, the legendary Malay warrior of Malacca's golden age, Hang Tuah, mystically travels to modern Malaysia before ultimately deciding to return to the past in order to intervene and prevent his fellow warrior, Hang Jebat, from consolidating power in the Malacca court. According to the director, Anwardi Jamil, although the film was still generating revenue at that time, it did not accumulate significant profits due to its distinct genre, which local audiences were not accustomed to (FINAS, 2023).

Additionally, the discourse surrounding Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat serves as a cyclical metaphor within the context of contemporary Malaysian politics. Kassim Ahmad (1997) posits that Hang Tuah, who exemplifies unwavering loyalty to the Sultan, represents the concept of loyalty, whereas his companion, Hang Jebat, embodies the counter-establishment through his defiance against the Sultan. In this regard, this study contends that the film's time-travel narrative juxtaposes modern Malaysia with the golden age of Malacca, functioning as what Boym describes as restorative nostalgia. Farish (2009) further posits that the romanticisation and nostalgic tendencies associated with the Malay warrior figure of Hang Tuah are intricately linked to Mahathir, who is a nationalist and right-wing politician.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the significant focus on cultural, gender, and ethnic representation in Malaysian cinema during the post-studio era (1975-2000s), the examination of nostalgia remains relatively underexplored. Therefore, this study is pivotal in addressing this gap within Malaysian cinema discourse by investigating the manifestation of restorative nostalgia during this era. The discourse surrounding restorative nostalgia within Malaysian cinema, particularly its emergence as a product of state nationalist ideology, is partly informed by the limited scholarly engagement with the nostalgia prevalent in the post-studio era. This post-studio era in Malaysian cinema, which is also often referred to as the Bumiputera Era (Hamzah, 1997:120) or the Independent Era (Hatta, 1994:7), primarily emphasises cultural, gender, and ethnic representation, alongside Hatta's critical examination of the national cinema and its evolution within Malay cinema.

Previous research has also addressed the impacts of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and modernisation on Malaysian cinema (Khoo, 2002, 2006, 2009; Zawawi, 2003, 2004, 2007). Studies on nostalgia, however, are represented by Norman Yusoff's

(2013) analysis, which investigates how nostalgia in two of Yasmin Ahmad's films critiques modernity through frameworks of gender, ethnicity, and national identity (2013: 260). In regard to that, this article aims to expand on Norman's (2021) research by analysing the portrayal of the time travel trope alongside the *purba* films as expressions of restorative nostalgia linked to ideological concerns.

THE HANG TUAH EPIC

In *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, a pivotal work in Malay literature, Hang Tuah is not just a warrior, but also a hero (Bailey, 2024). In its conclusion, Hang Tuah's fate is proclaimed as "*tiadalah mati*" ("will not die"), signifying his status as "*auliya' para laki-laki*" ("the saint of man"). The assertion that Hang Tuah "will not die" serves two interpretative purposes. Firstly, it emphasises his characterisation as *Maha Manusia* (Kassim, 1997:xii) suggesting a superhuman quality. Secondly, it implies that the discourse surrounding him will remain perpetually relevant. Khoo (2006) supports this notion by asserting that Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat represent the most significant national myths that resonate profoundly within Malaysian popular consciousness. The narrative arc of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* delineates the ascent of Hang Tuah, who is appointed as the Sultan's *laksamana* (admiral) after demonstrating exceptional valour by subduing an assailant in Malacca. Throughout the epic, Hang Tuah serves the Sultan and his four childhood comrades, securing his position as the Sultan's favoured subject.

However, due to envy exhibited by other court officials, Hang Tuah is unjustly accused of conspiring with the Sultan's concubine, culminating in the Sultan's unwarranted decree for his execution without a thorough investigation. Fortunately, the *Bendahara* (chief minister) discreetly conceals Hang Tuah within a village, thereby circumventing the Sultan's command. This injustice provokes anger and rebellion in Hang Jebat, Hang Tuah's childhood companion. Following the acquisition of Taming Sari, the esteemed dagger of Hang Tuah, from the Sultan, Hang Jebat seizes control of the palace. Consequently, the only individual equipped to defeat him is Hang Tuah. Upon confirming Hang Tuah's survival, the Sultan commands him to confront the rebels, leading to Hang Tuah's victorious engagement that results in the defeat of Hang Jebat.

The narrative surrounding Hang Tuah extends beyond *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, with a concise retelling found in *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals). Kassim Ahmad (1997) argues that the historical authenticity of Hang Tuah's existence is not of paramount importance, given that certain elements within *Hikayat Hang Tuah* contradict established historical facts. Notably, the *Hikayat* chronicles Hang Tuah's

life span from 1403 to 1511, which lacks logical consistency. Additionally, the narrative amalgamates the 13th-century Majapahit Empire with the 14th- century and 15th-century Malacca Sultanate. Discrepancies also arise concerning the Hang Tuah-Hang Jebat conflict, as depicted in *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and *Sejarah Melayu*. In the *Hikayat*, Hang Jebat engages in rebellion (*derhaka*), whereas *Sejarah Melayu* narrates a confrontation involving Hang Kasturi. These discrepancies raise questions regarding the historical veracity of Hang Tuah's existence. Kassim posits that these purported inaccuracies are only deemed "problematic" when *Hikayat Hang Tuah* is interpreted as a historical account. He asserts that the core intention of the *Hikayat* is to present Hang Tuah as a *Maha Manusia* (1997:xii), or a superhuman figure.

According to Kassim (1997), the character of Hang Tuah in *Hikayat Hang Tuah* reflects the historical fluctuations experienced in Malacca. During Hang Tuah's childhood, Malacca was a nascent empire grappling with development. In contrast, as Hang Tuah ascended to the rank of admiral, Malacca achieved the peak of its civilisation. Ultimately, as Hang Tuah aged, Malacca entered a period of decline, marking the end of its golden age. This correlation is underscored by the significance of his name, "Tuah" which translates to "fortune". Kassim (1997) asserts, "*Hang Tuah tidak dapat mewakili peribadi Melayu sepanjang zaman kerana unsur-unsur keperibadian itu sendiri ditentukan oleh keadaan sejarah*" (Hang Tuah could not represent Malay identity forever because the elements of identity are determined by historical conditions) [writer's translation] (1997:xiii). Thus, it is argued that Hang Tuah should not be regarded as an inviolable or essential representation of Malay identity. In addition, Kassim (1997) highlights, "*Tuah berada di sebelah kanan garis ideal, sedangkan Jebat di sebelah kiri.*" (Tuah is positioned on the right side of the ideal line, whereas Jebat stands to the left.) (1997:xix). In extending to that, Farish (2009:240) argues "...the figure of Hang Tuah came to light once again at the turn of the 20th century with the rise of Malayan nationalism, and the character of Hang Tuah once again adopted as one of the popular icons as of many nascent Malay-Muslim ethno-nationalist movement". Farish also adds:

Postcolonial nationalist today would have us believe that this man of Melaka was the champion of the Malay cause, and that Tuah motto's "*Takkan Melayu hilang di dunia*" has been literally translated to mean that Malay race will never cease to exist: a clarion call for racial ethnic unity on the part of ethno-nationalist communitarians who harbour the fear of racial extinction and the loss of power and selfhood.

(Farish, 2009:240)

In light of the above concern, this study argues that restorative nostalgia through the mediation of Hang Tuah is a manifestation of nationalist ideology that is

significant. This is because Hang Tuah is always synonymous with “Malay-Muslim ethnonationalist” and “the champion of the Malay cause” (Farish, 2009:240). It also relates to Kassim’s (1997) stand that Hang Tuah is on the right side of the ideal line, which is always synonymous with nationalist ideology. Meanwhile, Farish (2009) asserts that a significant number of Malaysians do not engage with *Hikayat Hang Tuah* in its entirety. It is not commonly acknowledged that the standard narrative version familiar to them is incomplete. Farish (2009) further notes that many Malaysians remain unaware of the unofficial second part of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, in which Hang Tuah, the warrior, assumes a substantially different role as the ambassador of Malacca to foreign territories. This lack of awareness has notably influenced popular culture, as many Malaysian films depicting Hang Tuah neglect the so-called second part of the epic. One example of the second part is Hang Tuah’s appointment as an emissary of Malacca to the South Indian kingdom, as well as the portrayal of his cosmopolitan side and fluid identity, evident in his self-identification as an ambassador of South India upon his arrival in China.

In contrast, popular culture, particularly film, tends to adapt the first part of the epic, which usually concludes with the final fight between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, portraying Hang Tuah as a “two-dimensional character who is less developed” (Farish, 2009:241) and as one who “blindly obeys his political masters” (Farish, 2009:241). Other noteworthy examples include productions from the studio era, such as *Hang Tuah* (Phani Majumdar, 1956) and *Hang Jebat* (Hussein Haniff, 1961), as well as those from the post-studio era, including *Tuah* (Anwardi, 1989) and *XX Ray II* (Aziz, 1995). Moreover, since 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) officially included *Hikayat Hang Tuah* in the Memory of the World Programme (Rozita & Hashim, 2021). Therefore, discourse on the mediation of Hang Tuah through *purba* films in the post-studio era of Malaysian cinema recognises their cultural and historical significance, while simultaneously calling for a critical engagement with the cinematic work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mediating Nostalgia in Films

In Tetik & Türkeli’s (2023) article, the nostalgic experience is explored as a central aspect of popular cinema, which is shifting towards becoming the dominant storytelling method, both in terms of context and commercial considerations. This shift is clear in the growing emphasis on cathartic reunions in remakes, reboots, sequels, prequels, spin-offs, and adaptations released on digital platforms and in

cinemas since 2021. Furthermore, Tetik and Türkeli (2023) note that 55% of the films listed in the Top 20 for 2022 are sequels. This percentage increased to 90% when including sequels, remakes, spin-offs, and adaptations. It is evident that these types of films have become major successes at the global box office. They often serve specific purposes, such as invoking nostalgia or providing cathartic experiences, influenced by industry trends and commercial motivations. From Tetik and Türkeli's study, it becomes evident that research on nostalgia in cinema remains relevant and has gained increasing importance since reaching a peak in the 2020s cinema. Although Tetik and Türkeli's article primarily focuses on industry aspects and global perspectives, it still provides valuable insights into the current relationship between nostalgia and the cinema market.

There are numerous similar studies addressing nostalgia that exist beyond the scope of Malaysian cinema, prominently featuring works by scholars such as Cook (2005), Lee (2013), and David Sweeney (2015). These studies predominantly examine nostalgia as a critical lens or a response to contemporary contexts. Specifically, Cook's seminal work, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (2005), delves into the film culture's pervasive preoccupation with its historical narratives. While Cook emphasises the function of cinema in mediating history, her analysis often prioritises period pieces. Nonetheless, her insights prove invaluable in understanding how nostalgia can be critically assessed within period films, distinguishing this analysis from evaluations of films produced in the contemporaneous era.

In her analysis, Lee (2015) contends that Singaporean cinema in the early 21st century is characterised by a phenomenon she identifies as “delayed nostalgia” for *kampung*, the Malay term for “village”. This delayed nostalgia can be attributed to the surge of the film industry in the 1990s, coupled with the rapid urban development that transpired in Singapore. Ying posits that this nostalgic sentiment for *kampung* manifests visually in Singaporean cinema, while simultaneously underscoring the sense of community inherent to *kampung* life, a quality many Singaporeans lament having lost. Although Sweeney's (2015) article shares a thematic resonance with this article, the scope of nostalgia discussed diverges significantly. Sweeney explores the notion of nostalgia in three films; *Sound of My Voice* (2011), *Looper* (2012), and *About Time* (2013), positioning it as a reflection and critique of contemporary Western society and its capitalist frameworks. Nonetheless, this study's argument resembles Sweeney's standpoint that the trope of time travel permeates various film genres beyond the realm of science fiction, often in an ambiguous manner. In contrast to Sweeney's perspective, which posits that nostalgia incites revolutionary action, this study argues that the portrayal of nostalgia in the films under consideration reinforces

dominant ideologies. The analysis of this study is heavily informed by Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia, which underpins the argumentation regarding the mediation of nostalgia within the selected cinematic works.

Consequently, the exploration of nostalgia within Malaysian cinema remains limited. The most notable existing study is by Norman (2013), which analyses the role of nostalgia in two films by Yasmin Ahmad, highlighting how it critiques modernity along gender, ethnic, and national lines (2013:260). Norman posits that Yasmin Ahmad's films blur the distinctions between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Therefore, this study seeks to extend Norman's (2013) analysis of nostalgia in Malaysian cinema by investigating how the time travel trope, combined with *purba* films, can be perceived as a (hyper) manifestation of restorative nostalgia.

At the same time, it is crucial to note that the chosen film also stirs up nostalgia for *purba* films. This claim is based on the idea that *Tuah* acts as a revisionist or neo-*purba* film, which is a film that functions as a homage to the *purba* films that were extensively produced during the golden age of the studio era. Norman Yusoff's (2021) article titled "Purba film as a prototype of Malay film genre: A preliminary exploration" is highly significant in this regard, since "*purba* film" is defined here as a Malay period costume film made during the studio era of Malay cinema in Singapore and Malaysia, roughly from the 1940s to the 1970s. According to Norman (2021), many *purba* films draw on bangsawan narratives, including landmark works such as the first Malay film, *Leila Majnun*, along with others like *Jula Juli Bintang Tujuh*, *Bidasari*, *Sultan Mahmud Mangkat Dijulang*, and *Singapura Dilanggar Todak*.

The *bangsawan* texts, typically derived from folk stories, *syair*, *hikayat*, and other literary forms, have emerged as the principal narrative materials for cinematic adaptation (Norman, 2021:206). *Bangsawan* is a classical Malay opera featuring stylised acting, vibrant costumes, and essential song-and-dance sequences. These elements have increasingly been adapted and incorporated into films, as they have become fundamental components of Malay entertainment culture (Hassan, 2014:18). Rahmah Bujang (in Norman, 2021:206-207) stated that *bangsawan* narratives consist of three popular forms, which are 'historical narrative', 'local narrative' and 'narrative that draws on foreign texts, especially those from Arab, India, China and Europe,' which 'generally address the themes of cruelty, romance, matrimony, adventure and heroism'. The tale of Hang *Tuah* fits as a historical narrative because although his existence remains a myth and mystery, his background captures Malacca's historical narratives.

On a related note, this study intends to extend Norman's (2021) argument that *purba* films reflect specific social and political concerns, such as issues related to

feudalism/anti-feudalism or traditionalism/liberalism. The ideological concern in *purba* films extends beyond their narrative settings to the sociopolitical context in which they were produced (Norman 2021:214). This exploration will interpret the mediation of restorative nostalgia in the film *Tuah* as an expression of the hegemonic ideology associated with Malay nationalist discourse during Mahathir Mohamad's first premiership.

METHODOLOGY

Restorative Nostalgia

This study posits that the film *Tuah*, specifically the Malacca Sultanate era and the prominent figure of Hang Tuah, exemplifies a form of restorative nostalgia as articulated by Svetlana Boym in her work, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). Restorative nostalgia is more focused on *nostos*, or an attempt to reconstruct the "lost home". For Boym, one constrained by restorative nostalgia "will consider his/her nostalgia as truth and tradition". Boym also emphasised that restorative nostalgia is "the core of recent national and religious revivals" that is related to two main plots "the return to origins and the conspiracy" (2001:19).

According to Boym, "nostalgia" can be defined as "longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (2001:13). From this definition, this study contends that the golden age of Malacca represents a form of nostalgia for the Malays, as they yearn for an era that is no longer in existence. The Malacca Sultanate era's image has been popularised through the Malay *purba* films of the studio era (1940–1970) and other government cultural programmes and policies, including the National Culture Policy (NCP). Consequently, it is unequivocal that the *purba* films from the studio era serve as a manifestation of nostalgia for the Malay Sultanate period. This notion aligns with Boym's assertion that nostalgia encompasses a utopian dimension, which may not always directly reference the past but can be considered somewhat "sideways". Therefore, this study aims to examine this restorative nostalgia within the selected film as a mechanism of ideological construction. In the film *Tuah*, restorative nostalgia operates to sustain and reinforce the prevailing historical narrative associated with the Hang Tuah –Hang Jebat discourse (in which Hang Jebat is demonised, while Tuah is portrayed in such a heroic manner). Through the romanticisation of Hang Tuah's heroism and as an agent of restoring order, the narrative indirectly aligns with the hegemony of Malay nationalism during Mahathir's first premiership, particularly in relation to his party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which is a Malay-centric political party within the National Front (BN) coalition.

The statement above is not an overinterpretation because, according to Khoo (2006), the Hang Tuah – Hang Jebat relationship, as a national myth, continues to resonate significantly within Malaysian popular consciousness. For Khoo (2006:24), “Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat may stand as opposites in the Malay psyche, representing the rational ego that is always in control and the emotional, sensual, excessive id”. In regard to that, Khoo (2006) states that the antagonistic dynamic between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat reappeared in Malaysian political discourse in the late 1990s, when tensions between Mahathir and his former deputy prime minister and designated successor, Anwar Ibrahim, escalated into an explicit struggle for power. In light of that, Mahathir, who was widely known as an authoritarian political figure, was not only popular for his anti-imperialist rhetoric, but also for his ambitious nationalist project (Khoo, 2006). In contrast, Anwar Ibrahim emerged as a charismatic former student activist and a prominent leader of the Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), and was imprisoned in 1974 for his involvement in the farmers’ protests (Khoo, 2006). There is another significant spectrum that relates to the discourse of Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, as argued by Khoo (2006), which is the “dependency” on “order” and “saviour”. If during the Malacca Sultanate era, “the subjects derived their social, cultural, and religious identity from the king” (Khoo, 2006:33), then in present-day Malaysia, “the people look for political guidance and protection of their socio-economic and cultural rights from UMNO” (2006:33). In this regard, Amoroso (2014) highlights the contradictions in Mahathir’s stance on traditional Malay values, particularly regarding feudalism. While Mahathir criticised feudalism as a factor that “cuts the Malays off from changes” (2001:1), he did not advocate for its abolition. Instead, he contended that “feudalism can be beneficial if it facilitates changes” (Khoo, 2006:40).

The evolution of the culture of dependency, evocative of feudalism, can be analysed through the framework of “invented tradition,” as articulated by Eric Hobsbawm and subsequently utilised by Boym. Boym elucidates the paradoxes inherent in invented traditions; although modernisation unfolds swiftly and profoundly, the emergent traditions frequently exhibit resistance to change, thereby perpetuating conservative values (Boym, 2001:42). Moreover, a pronounced emphasis on traditional values and maintaining continuity with historical precedents often results in a selective portrayal of history. New traditions, despite their contemporary origins, can be deeply rooted in antiquity (Boym, 2001:42).

In the light of the above concern, Boym (2001:45) argues that “the 1980s and 1990s was a time of the great revival of the past in several projects of total restoration”, a tendency which she refers to as an attempt to restore a sense of the sacred that has been believed to be lost from the modern ages. The range of architectural and cultural influences extends from the Sistine Chapel to the Cathedral of Christ the

Savior in Moscow. In regard to that, the Malay revivalist movement occurred in Malaysia during the 1980s and 1990s, closely associated with the emergence of Mahathirist ethnonationalism. Henceforth, this study aims to elucidate the reflection of external political discourse within the context of post-studio era filmmaking. *Tuah*, regarded as a revisionist iteration of the *purba* film genre, demonstrates a synergy with converging time travel tropes. Concerning that, the time travel tropes are being argued as aligning with Boym's assertion that the juxtaposition or superimposition of past and present functions to exemplify a cinematic representation of nostalgia.

This study will be conducted in a qualitative method with the employment of textual analysis as its tool. Textual analysis is applied in examining visual, written, or recorded materials to explore the meanings and messages conveyed in media, literature, public discourse, and sources such as personal interviews. Data are systematically collected and interpreted to generate a more in-depth understanding and critical interpretation of meanings within a text or across multiple texts. "Texts" are not limited to books or documents, but also include photographs, advertisements, interviews, performances, social media content, films, television programmes, and historical artefacts (Hawkins, 2017). Since this study seeks to interpret films in relation to the discourse of nationalism during Mahathir's first premiership and other relevant historical texts, textual analysis is therefore the most appropriate methodological approach.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Narrative of *Tuah* (1989)

Datuk Shaari and Shahira find themselves ensnared in a robbery, from which they are rescued by an individual who identifies himself as Hang Tuah, a celebrated Malay warrior from the Malacca Sultanate era. During this crime episode, Hang Tuah sustains a gunshot wound to the shoulder, though this injury proves to be non-critical. Exhibiting scepticism towards Hang Tuah's true identity, Shahira and Datuk Shaari opt to subject him to both physical and psychological evaluations. Over time, their interactions lead to a growing rapport with Hang Tuah. Notably, it is revealed that Hang Tuah has been transported to the modern era after taking refuge in a cave, following a death summons from the Sultan of Malacca, prompted by accusations of a clandestine relationship with Tun Teja, the Sultan's consort.

The narrative surrounding *Tuah* presents a distinctive interpretation of the legendary figure Hang Tuah. In *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, a pivotal moment occurs when Hang Jebat seizes control of the Malacca palace, prompting Datuk Bendahara (the chief minister) to inform the Sultan of Hang Tuah's survival. Subsequently, the Sultan

grants Hang Tuah clemency and assigns him to eliminate the rebel, Hang Jebat. In contrast, the portrayal of history within the modern Malaysian film *Tuah* diverges significantly from that of the *hikayat*. This divergence is illustrated when Shahira informs Hang Tuah that, according to historical records, Hang Tuah has perished. This reinterpretation of history leads to a poignant moment during their visit to the museum in Malacca, where Hang Tuah learns that Hang Jebat, having rebelled and killed the Sultan, ascended to the throne. Consequently, this iteration of the historical narrative reveals Hang Tuah's desire for restoration and redemption.

On another note, the production of this film is understood as a form of restorative nostalgia, manifested through the reconstruction of the old Malacca Sultanate setting and the glorification of Hang Tuah as a heroic figure across both past and present temporalities. This aligns with Boym's definition of restorative nostalgia as a "longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (2001:13). At the same time, the cinematic remaking of the Malacca Sultanate and the heroic representation of Hang Tuah also operate as a form of hegemonic ideology, specifically a nationalist project informed by the NCP, which positions the Malay-Muslim identity as the central axis of cultural production.

The phrase "Return to the purba days" serves as both a tribute to the Malay cinema of the studio era and a reflection of a "lost home" that the filmmakers yearn for; a nostalgia rooted in the experiences of the ruling class. Malaysian cinema from the 1980s and 1990s is heavily intertwined with themes of nostalgia. This is especially evident in films that contrast urban and *kampung* (rural) settings, highlighting Malaysia's rapid development driven by the NEP and privatisation. Such changes prompted *kampung* residents to migrate to the city for employment. Another form of nostalgia is found in period films focusing on pre-colonial and colonial eras, including several *purba* films such as *Tuah*. Nostalgia plays a significant role in capturing the zeitgeist of the post-studio era, as many traditional subjects began to fade away in the wake of the NEP and privatisation. Moreover, the cinema of this era is associated with Bumiputera participation in two key respects: (a) it marks a period in which the Malays and Bumiputera owned and operated film production companies, unlike the studio era, during which they did not control the business; and (b) it reflects a nostalgic impulse to reclaim and reimagine the so-called golden age of Malay cinema associated with the studio era.

***Bangsawan* and *Silat* as Forms of Restorative Nostalgia**

Juxtaposition is one of the key elements or motifs in *Tuah* that manifests in a few forms. At certain junctures, it is not only a form of juxtaposition, but also

an overlapping temporality when the film portrays Hang Tuah transported to the present day. Juxtaposition between the past and present is exhibited through costume and mediated through the duality of modern and traditional elements, which is established from the film's outset. For instance, Shahira, engaged in a contemporary cosmopolitan fashion show, finds herself unexpectedly entwined in a robbery alongside her father. At this moment, Hang Tuah emerges, adorned in a complete traditional Malay costume, including a *tanjak*, *sampin*, and *baju Melayu*, to assist Shahira and her father.

At this juncture, the robber recognises that Hang Tuah's attire does not align with contemporary clothing style; rather, it is more closely associated with the traditional Malay theatre known as *bangsawan*, evoking a sense of nostalgia. A parallel acknowledgement occurs in the scene featuring the police officer and Datuk Shaari, where the officer integrates Hang Tuah's *bangsawan* attire into his ambiguous identity. This contrast in attire functions not merely as costume design, but as a form of ideological concern. Hang Tuah, who is dressed in traditional Malay attire, is portrayed as a saviour and a bearer of truth, becoming synonymous with protection and moral authority. In this regard, his presence from the past conveys not only the image of a Malay warrior, but also an essentialist perspective, suggesting that the Malays must return to their cultural roots in order to endure.

This is not merely a new sentiment because traditionally, *purba* films are always inclined to ideological concerns (Norman, 2021). Significantly, the film *Hang Tuah*, which was directed by Phani Majumdar in 1956, embodies the ethos and sensibilities aligned with the emergence of Malay nationalism in the period leading up to national independence (Norman, 2021). In the film, Hang Tuah is constructed and celebrated as a powerful and exemplary symbol of Malay cultural values, while simultaneously being portrayed as a loyal and obedient subject of the Sultan of Malacca (Norman, 2021). Hence, it is significant to argue that the reproduction of Hang Tuah in film functions as a reflection of nationalist ideology, as since the country's earliest cinematic production, these films have consistently articulated a nationalist agenda that extends beyond the textual narrative itself.

It is also noteworthy that a significant number of the crew involved in this film are veterans from the industrial milieu of studio-era Malaysian cinema, with many actors having transitioned from *bangsawan* performance prior to their involvement in film studios (Hatta, 1994;7). Rosnani Jamil, a significant figure in studio-era cinema, assumed responsibility for the costume design in *Tuah*. This sense of nostalgia towards the studio era is important to note because *Tuah* clearly embodies a form of nostalgia for Malay cinema of this era. It also reflects a nostalgic engagement with the earlier films *Hang Tuah* (1956), directed by Phani Majumdar and *Hang Jebat* (1961)

directed by Hussein Haniff, which, despite focusing on different perspectives, do not alter the core narrative of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, in which Hang Tuah defeats Hang Jebat and Hang Jebat is killed. However, even though *Tuah* was produced more than three decades later and incorporates a time-travel element alongside the *purba* film, it nonetheless insists on maintaining the established status quo.

Besides *bangsawan* and *purba* elements, *Tuah* portrays a tension regarding the principles of *silat* (a form of Malay martial arts), as demonstrated in the interactions between Hang Tuah and contemporary *silat* practitioners in Malaysia. This tension is exemplified when Tok Guru, the *silat* master, challenges Hang Tuah in a *silat* court, expressing scepticism about Hang Tuah's authenticity as the legendary Hang Tuah. Following this challenge, Hang Tuah and Tok Guru's protégé prepare for the upcoming duel. In depicting the process of *silat* training, director Anwardi strategically employs an intercut technique to juxtapose the training regimens of Syafie, the current *silat* champion, and Hang Tuah.

Syafie's training exemplifies a contemporary approach that integrates various techniques, including the use of a punching bag, running track miles, and sparring in a boxing ring. In stark contrast, Hang Tuah's training is characterised by solitary practice in the jungle, which embodies a more traditional methodology, albeit enhanced by the modern incorporation of isotonic beverages, notably 100 Plus, consumed by Hang Tuah. Upon completing the training sessions, Shahira arrives on horseback, providing dialogues that elucidate the rationale behind the director's employment of intercutting editing techniques, effectively juxtaposing Syafie and Hang Tuah's training regimens. Shahira articulates to Hang Tuah that *silat* has undergone significant evolution, assimilating elements from various martial arts such as karate and judo, along with other global disciplines. Syafie's training exemplifies a modernised and globalised methodology within the context of *silat*. The interaction between traditionalist and hybrid *silat* forms illustrates the director's essentialist perspective on culture and identity. In this cinematic narrative, Hang Tuah embodies the concept of essentialism, representing the *keaslian* (authenticity) of Malayness through cultural expression. The notion of *bangsawan* and the associated tensions of authenticity within *silat* align with Hobsbawm's concept of "restored or invented traditions", which he defines as "a ritual of symbolic nature that seeks to instil specific values and behavioural norms through repetition, inherently suggesting continuity with the past" (2001:42).

Hang Tuah, the Nostalgic Warrior

The character most deeply immersed in nostalgia within the narrative of *Tuah* is the titular character himself. The film articulates Hang Tuah's nostalgic sentiments by

contrasting the contemporary setting with historical reflections through the use of flashbacks and dream sequences. An exception to this narrative device occurs in the conclusion, wherein Hang Tuah returns to the Malacca Sultanate era. These sequences serve as manifestations of Hang Tuah's recollections and an intense longing for Malacca. For example, Hang Tuah's feelings of yearning and homesickness become evident during his sojourn in present-day Malaysia, as he experiences vivid dreams of his past in Malacca.

In another scene, Hang Tuah stresses his uneasiness and restlessness towards modern Malaysia by saying to Shahira,

"Tempat ini terlalu ganjil untuk hamba, tidak seperti negeri Melaka yang hamba kenali. Sungguh berlainan."

(This place is so strange to me, not the same as Malacca that I know. They are very different.)

(Anwardi, 1989, 00:28:37)

When Shahira asks Hang Tuah to tell her about Malacca, he tends to romanticise it by saying,

"Melaka sebuah kota yang terindah dan terkaya di rantau ini. Bahkan juga, yang terkuat dan termasyhur. Negara Majapahit juga tidak berani mencabar kegagahan negeri Melaka, dimana Tuah bergelar Laksamana."

(Malacca is the most beautiful and richest country in this region. Malacca is the strongest and most popular. Even Majapahit did not dare to challenge Malacca's power, where I (Hang Tuah) was an admiral.)

(Anwardi, 1989, 00:29:07)

Hang Tuah's dialogues signify romanticised nostalgia; at the same time, he is obscuring the weakness of Malaccan court institutions, including how he had been summoned to death after being defamed by other court officials. Nevertheless, this portrayal of such a nostalgic warrior is a form of dramatisation of restorative nostalgia for two main reasons. The first is that "restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition," (Boym, 2011;xviii) and the second is that "restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt" (Boym, 2011;xviii).

In exploring Hang Tuah's identity, Datuk Shaari engages a psychologist to assist Hang Tuah through a hypnosis session. During this session, the psychologist prompts Hang Tuah to recount his background, leading the latter to narrate a significant episode where he and his peers courageously subdued an individual who had gone

on a violent rampage in their village. This recollection of a pivotal moment not only serves as a reflection of Hang Tuah's past, but also encapsulates his nostalgia, illustrating a profound yearning for his hometown of Malacca and the companionship of his friends. The subsequent scene that encapsulates the protagonist's yearning for the past occurs as he sits solitary upon a granite stone at the beach in the present day.

Abruptly, the scene transitions into his nostalgic recollection of Tun Teja at the beach in Pahang. Within this flashback, he fervently confesses to Tun Teja his burgeoning feelings of love towards her. Nonetheless, given that Tun Teja is destined to become the future queen of Malacca, Hang Tuah is compelled to repress his emotional inclinations. Hang Tuah's affection for Tun Teja manifests as a form of *derhaka* (treason) against the Sultan. This particular scene poignantly underscores Hang Tuah's fealty to the Sultan and serves as a prelude to his impending conflict with Hang Jebat's rebellion. Subsequently, the narrative transitions into the musical interlude featuring Hang Tuah and Tun Teja, reflecting a prominent characteristic of *purba* films that integrates song-and-dance sequences reminiscent of *bangsawan* and popular Indian cinema (Norman, 2021). Although the interaction between Hang Tuah and Tun Teja emphasises vocal performance over dance, an additional scene unfolds in the court where Dang Biru, one of the concubines of Malacca's royal court, captivates Hang Jebat with her performance encompassing both song and dance.

Returning to the scene featuring Hang Tuah and Tun Teja in song, it is noteworthy that they perform *Berkorban Apa Saja* (Sacrifice Anything), a composition by the illustrious and multifaceted artist, P. Ramlee. This song is a powerful embodiment of Hang Tuah's unwavering loyalty to the Sultan, as it illustrates his readiness to forgo his personal sentiments for Tun Teja, and potentially his life, to uphold his allegiance to the Sultan. Additionally, it is significant that the song *Berkorban Apa Saja* gradually fades in following the moment Tun Teja makes contact with Hang Tuah's hand; in response, Hang Tuah promptly withdraws his hand. This action reflects Hang Tuah's attempt to suppress or deny his emotions for her.

Saving History, Restoring Order

Hang Tuah, both in the historical context and contemporary narrative, exhibits a consistent characteristic; his unwavering attitude and disposition towards allegiance to authority. In historical accounts, he is depicted as an individual who readily complies with any directive issued by the Sultan, even when such orders may lead to his own demise. Before his surrender to Datuk Bendahara, Hang Tuah instructs Lekir to present the Taming Sari keris to Hang Jebat, expressing a desire to prevent Hang Jebat from committing *derhaka* (rebellion) against the Sultan. This act underscores Hang Tuah's profound loyalty to the Sultan. In modern interpretations, Hang Tuah's allegiance to authority is subtly conveyed through his association with Datuk Shaari,

a character who embodies the complexities of political influence despite being portrayed as a protagonist. In his office, while receiving a report from his assistant, Datuk Shaari, who stands in front of Mahathir's photo, enthusiastically says,

"Kaulah kita dapat pastikan siapa budak ini (Hang Tuah) sebenarnya, kita boleh jadikan dia hero. Saya percaya, kita boleh gunakan dia sebagai lambang untuk kempen kita yang akan datang. Anak Melayu yang berani, tak takut mati, orang macam nilah yang kita perlukan sekarang."

(If we know him (Hang Tuah) more, we could make him (Hang Tuah) a hero. I believe that we can use him as a symbol for our next election campaign. He is a brave Malay man who is not afraid to die. This is the kind of person we need.)

(Anwardi, 1989; 00:26:21)

Such dialogues reflect a longing for heroic figures within modern and contemporary Malay society, which can be argued as a form of restorative nostalgia. This desire for nationalist heroes is not new; rather, it began in 1957, marking Malaysia's independence. During this period, there emerged a quest among the Malay elite for national heroes (Shaharuddin, 1984;66). However, in this pursuit, Kassim Ahmad's proposal to designate Hang Jebat as a national hero faced opposition from several national scholars and prominent figures, including Ismail Hussein. Hussein contended that there is insufficient evidence to support the notion that the people of 16th-century Malacca regarded Hang Jebat as a hero in the same manner as 20th-century perspectives. In 1994, Ismail Embong, a Malaysian artist, held a painting exhibition detailing the history of the nationalist movement in Malaysia, coinciding with the 48th anniversary of UMNO's establishment (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, UMNO, & GAPENA 1994;22). The exhibition's title was drawn from Hang Tuah's renowned phrase, *"Tak Melayu hilang di dunia"* (The Malay will not vanish from the earth).

In light of the above mentioned, Hang Tuah became more widely accepted as a national hero by both the common and ruling classes, albeit not necessarily for his intellectual qualities (this is mostly portrayed in the infamous second part of Hikayat Hang Tuah), but primarily for his sense of order and loyalty. In Tuah, there is a scene that portrays the loyalty side of Hang Tuah even in the modern era. It is when Datuk Shaari informs Hang Tuah that a psychologist will be brought in to assess him, to which Hang Tuah spontaneously responds:

"Hamba terhutang budi kepada Datuk, apa saja yang Datuk inginkan, hamba akan turutkan."

(I am indebted to you, Datuk. Whatever Datuk wishes of me, I shall comply.)

(Anwardi, 1989, 00:39:54)

This exchange reflects Hang Tuah's continued desire to serve his superior and adhere to established authority, despite Datuk Shaari's indebtedness to him. Hang Tuah's characterisation as a proponent of the status quo suggests a critical stance towards the narrative of Hang Jebat within the film. In another scene, during a visit to the museum with Shahira, Hang Tuah is taken aback upon discovering the historical account that Hang Jebat ascended to the position of Sultan Anuar Alauddin Shah after eliminating Sultan Mahmud. Notably, this depiction of Hang Jebat's actions is absent in prominent texts such as *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, as well as in cinematic interpretations, including *Hang Tuah* (Phani, 1956) and *Hang Jebat* (Hussein, 1961). Shahira further reveals to Hang Tuah that Hang Jebat reigned over Malacca briefly before being assassinated by courtiers. Shahira asserts that upon assuming power, Hang Jebat perpetrated the killings of numerous individuals who did not engage in any wrong doing or sinful behaviour.

The enormity of Hang Jebat sparks Hang Tuah's restless feelings about what happened to Malacca, the death of Sultan Mahmud, and Hang Jebat's rebellion, making Hang Tuah want to return to the past. He then sees a keris in the museum, which he believes is a Taming Sari keris. The "king of all *keris*" then magically transports him to the Malacca Sultanate era in the 15th century. While fighting Hang Jebat, Hang Tuah tells him,

"Niat kau mungkin baik. Tapi cara kau yang salah, Jebat."

(Your intention might be good, but your method is wrong, Jebat.)

(Anwardi, 1989, 01:36:48)

He continues,

"Sikap kau mungkin dipuji di suatu masa nanti, Jebat. Itu sudah wajarlah, kerana zaman dan nilai hidup sentiasa berubah."

(Your actions may be praised. However, that recognition will occur because both time and values change.)

(Anwardi, 1989, 01:38:57)

Yet, this dialogue does not intend to glorify Hang Jebat's actions. Hang Tuah goes on to explain that rebellion will recur in different times, eras, and forms. He argues that "human greed and envy are the causes of a nobleman's decay." This illustrates Hang Tuah's disagreement with acts of rebellion against authority, regardless of the

time period or context. According to him, the roots of dissent and rebellion stem from human greed and envy, rather than from unjust laws or oppressive rule. Hang Jebat responds with the statement,

“*Kau seolah-olah dapat memandang jauh ke depan.*”
(It seems that you can predict the future.)

(Anwardi, 1988, 01:39:43)

He suggesting that this claim encapsulates the entire use of the time-travel narrative in the film. This indicates that Hang Tuah is a visionary capable of “seeing the future” since, throughout the film, he does indeed travel into the future. Hence, the time travel narrative is significant because it positions Hang Tuah as a visionary figure, someone whom the ruling class believes remains relevant to modern Malaysia. In the end, Hang Tuah manages to kill Hang Jebat. The fighting scene between them ends with the visual of Hang Tuah’s silhouette, and blood flowing in front of the silhouette. This ending is distinct from *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and the film *Hang Jebat*, in which after Hang Tuah defeats Hang Jebat, Hang Jebat runs amok around Malacca, causing the deaths of thousands of people (Kassim, 1997:xxi).

Kassim argues that Hang Jebat’s act of killing Malaccan civilians stems from his disappointment in them for upholding the feudal system (Kassim, 1997:xxii). In the ending scene of *Tuah*, this study contends that the fight between Hang Jebat and Hang Tuah, which concludes with Hang Jebat’s death in court, symbolises the “restoration of order.” Haniff (2022) contends that Hang Tuah, as depicted in *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, possesses a humanitarian quality through his expressions of sympathy towards Hang Jebat’s prior suffering. While this theme is also present in Phani Majumdar’s *Hang Tuah* (1956), it is notably absent in *Tuah*. This indicates that Hang Tuah, representing a feudal-nationalist warrior, successfully restores order within the Malaccan state. This can be interpreted as the filmmaker’s belief that only nationalism can maintain stability in the country; any opposition, such as the rebellious Hang Jebat, leads to chaos. Furthermore, this theme of “restoration of order” permeates the entire film. Hang Tuah’s strange journey to modern-day Malaysia and then back to the past is an act of reclaiming history to restore order.

This aligns with Kassim’s (1997) argument that the heroism of Hang Tuah serves more as a defence of the status quo. In addition to that, Khoo (2006:41) mentions Operation Lalang in 1987, during which Mahathir’s government cracked down on 115 social activists, environmentalists, Chinese education advocates, opposition politicians, and various radicals; it also banned three newspapers. Coincidentally, the film *Tuah* was produced after Operation Lalang, which involved mass arrests, amid

factionalism in UMNO. This period is when Mahathir “beautified loyalty” (Khoo, 1995:10).

The idea of restoring order in *Tuah* is also highlighted in the film’s ending scene, which mirrors the robbery scene shown at the beginning. The key difference is that Hang Tuah is now dressed in modern clothing: a jacket, shirt, and jeans, rather than the traditional *bangsawan* costume. Instead of wielding a *keris*, he is armed with a gun. After defeating the robbers, he identifies himself as Assistant Superintendent (ASP) Sazali, a policeman, signalling a shift from his identity as Hang Tuah. In this scene, the director positions Hang Tuah, a *laksamana*, as a figure equivalent to modern-day law enforcement. This transformation suggests that Hang Tuah embodies the idea that he is part of the state apparatus rather than civil society. It emphasises Hang Tuah as an agent of restoring order through the lens of Malay nationalist ideology. This interpretation aligns with Farish’s (2009:241) assertion that by today’s standards, Hang Tuah would be seen as an ideal candidate for the state’s moral guardians or thought police.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study argues that the film *Tuah* constitutes a form of restorative nostalgia through its portrayal and glorification of the heroic figure Hang Tuah as depicted in the film, as well as through the juxtaposition of present-day Malaysia with the Malacca Sultanate in the 15th century. The study further demonstrates that despite his mystical time-travel journey into the future, Hang Tuah performs multiple functions: as an agent of restoring order, a representative of essentialist cultural values, and a symbol of loyalty. Through a textual analysis of the film’s narrative and visual strategies, situated within their historical context and informed by Boym’s (2001) theoretical framework, the study shows that *Tuah*’s mediation of nostalgia and its idealisation of the Malacca Sultanate reveal a romanticised vision of the past that closely aligns with the nationalist ideology promoted during the first premiership of Mahathir Mohamad. Ultimately, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of nostalgia as a cultural and political mechanism in Malaysian cinema, particularly in shaping cinematic representations of history and identity.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and/or its supplementary materials.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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