Hang Tuah, an Applied Administrative Figure in The History of the Indonesian Archipelago

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Abstract

This study aims to interpret the role of Hang Tuah as a maritime administrator who applied a practical administrative system within the governance structure of the fifteenth-century Malacca Sultanate. Using an applied anthropological approach, the study examines Hang Tuah's behavior, values, and administrative practices within the socio-cultural context of the Malay maritime world. Data were collected through historical literature analysis of classical manuscripts such as Sulalatus Salatin and The Malacca Maritime Code, combined with interpretative analysis of Hang Tuah's administrative conduct in royal governance. The results reveal that Hang Tuah was not only a naval commander but also an administrative reformer who institutionalized meritocracy, bureaucratic discipline, and maritime economic redistribution based on justice. These findings indicate that the Malacca Sultanate had developed a governance system adaptive to cross-cultural trade dynamics. In conclusion, Hang Tuah emerges as a figure of applied administration who bridges Malay ethical leadership values with modern principles of public administration. The implication of this study suggests the need to reinterpret historical Nusantara figures through the lens of contemporary administrative science to enrich models of maritime governance in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Hang Tuah, Maritime Administration, Applied Anthropology, Malacca Sultanate, Nusantara Governance.

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Introduction

The 15th-century Malacca Sultanate was one of Southeast Asia's greatest maritime powers, playing a central role in international trade networks connecting China, India, the Middle East, and the Malay Archipelago (Andaya & Andaya, 2015). Its strategic position along the narrow Malacca Strait positioned it not only as a trade hub but also as a center of diplomacy, law, and culture (Milner, 2011). The Sultanate's success relied not only on military might but also on its ability to establish an adaptive and efficient governance system capable of integrating diverse ethnic, religious, and economic interests into a relatively stable social structure.

Within this administrative context emerged the legendary figure Hang Tuah, renowned not only for loyalty and heroism but also as a practitioner of applied administration. Hang Tuah's actions reveal a systematic approach to governance, conflict management, and public service guided by ethical values. As recorded in classical texts such as Hikayat Hang Tuah and Sejarah Melayu, he performed administrative functions including fleet organization, foreign diplomacy, and port supervision (Shellabear, 1908; Braginsky, 2004).

Applied administration, in this study, refers to the enactment of administrative principles contextualized within local social-political structures. Hang Tuah integrated Malay local wisdom with geopolitical imperatives, demonstrating soft diplomacy as a royal envoy and maintaining organizational discipline within Malacca's maritime administration (Andaya, 2016; Milner, 2011). His administration reflected efficiency, hierarchy, and moral accountability, suggesting that the roots of Indonesian public administration extend beyond Western colonial influence (Gullick, 1987; Reid, 1993).

Moreover, Hang Tuah exemplified the relationship between power and morality in administration. Loyalty to the Sultan can be interpreted as professional integrity toward a system rather than blind obedience to an individual ruler. He repeatedly balanced royal commands with public interest and political stability—a practice aligning with contemporary concepts of public accountability and responsibility (Braginsky, 2004; Milner, 2011).

Thus, interpreting Hang Tuah as a figure of applied administration opens a new lens for understanding the historical development of administration in Nusantara. He was a blend of strategy, ethics, and bureaucratic efficiency, offering insights into value-based administration that remain relevant for modern public administration in Indonesia.

Literature Review

2.1 Applied Administration in Public Administration Studies

Applied administration emphasizes translating foundational administrative principles into context-specific practices aligned with cultural and social values (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003). Modern public administration sees administration not merely as a technocratic mechanism but as a domain of ethics and public service (Denhardt & Catlaw, 2015).

Weber's (1947) rational-legal bureaucracy emphasizes formal rules, clear hierarchy, and meritocracy. However, critiques argue that it neglects cultural and moral dimensions, particularly in non-Western contexts. The New Public Service (NPS) paradigm emphasizes ethics, empathy, and participatory governance, aligning closely with values historically embedded in Malay administrative practice (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003).

2.2 Administrative Tradition in Malay Governance

Prior to European colonialism, Malay polities exhibited structured governance systems. The Malacca Sultanate featured an efficient maritime bureaucracy with clearly defined roles: Bendahara (chief minister), Temenggung (security overseer), Laksamana (naval commander and diplomat), and Syahbandar (port master) (Andaya & Andaya, 2015). Each office bore specific responsibilities critical to political stability and economic management.

According to Gullick (1987), Malay governance was dualistic: spiritual legitimacy under the Sultan (daulat) coexisted with technical-administrative expertise among officials. Administration served not only management purposes but also the maintenance of moral and social order. Classical texts, including Sejarah Melayu, detail procedural and diplomatic norms, showing that Malay bureaucratic practice contained rational administrative elements long before Western influence.

2.3 Ethics, Leadership, and Moral Values in Malay Governance

Malay governance ethics rested on three interrelated concepts: daulat (sovereign legitimacy), amanah (public responsibility), and maruah (honor) (Hooker, 2003). These guided official behavior and social-political relations. Administrators were expected to exercise authority in balance with social responsibility, reflecting principles akin to contemporary servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977).

Hang Tuah's loyalty embodies professional integrity aligned with system stability rather than mere obedience. Musyawarah (consultation) and hikmah (wisdom) in decision-making parallel deliberative governance concepts emphasizing moral reasoning and social consensus (Dryzek, 2000; Braginsky, 2004).

2.4 Hang Tuah in Historiography and Administration

Hang Tuah merges cultural symbolism with administrative function. Beyond heroic narratives, he organized military command, executed diplomatic missions, and implemented royal policies (Andaya, 2016). His actions reflect high political rationality and administrative competence within a patronage-based monarchy (Milner, 2011). In modern terms, he represents applied administration integrating strategy, ethics, and coordination to maintain organizational stability.

2.5 Conceptual Relevance to Contemporary Public Administration

Exploring the legacy of Hang Tuah provides valuable insights into the foundational principles underlying Indonesia's administrative traditions. Central Malay concepts such as daulat (sovereignty), amanah (trustworthiness), and maruah (dignity) resonate with contemporary ideas in public administration, including legitimacy, accountability, and the ethical conduct of bureaucrats. By revisiting these historical ideals, scholars and practitioners gain a richer perspective on how cultural values continue to shape governance practices today. Such reflection not only highlights the moral and ethical dimensions embedded in historical administrative frameworks but also emphasizes the importance of integrating these principles into modern bureaucratic systems. In this context, the work of Denhardt and Catlaw (2015) becomes particularly relevant. Their notion of "moral imagination" encourages public administrators to interpret bureaucratic behaviors and decision-making processes within their cultural and historical milieu, rather than as isolated technical exercises. Applying this lens

allows for a more nuanced understanding of how administrative legitimacy and ethical responsibility are maintained across different contexts. Consequently, studying Hang Tuah's legacy is not merely a historical exercise; it offers contemporary public administration a culturally grounded framework for enhancing integrity, fostering accountability, and cultivating ethical governance practices that remain relevant in Indonesia's evolving bureaucratic landscape.

Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive and historical-interpretative approach to understand Hang Tuah beyond his legendary status, viewing him as a historical embodiment of Malay administrative principles and governance practices (Creswell, 2018; Milner, 2011). By employing an interpretative lens, the research investigates the socio-political and cultural forces that influenced his administrative decisions and conduct. The study emphasizes how historical, ethical, and cultural contexts intersect to shape leadership behavior, providing insights into the broader governance traditions of the Malay world (Kuntowijoyo, 2003).

3.2 Research Setting and Data Sources

This research centers on the historical and cultural landscape of classical Malay polities, tracing the enduring influence of the Malacca Sultanate across regions such as Sumatra, Riau, Johor, and Lingga. By situating the study within these interconnected territories, the research captures the diffusion of political, administrative, and cultural practices shaped by Malacca's legacy. The setting allows for a nuanced examination of how local governance, social structures, and cultural norms were historically informed by broader Malay political traditions, offering a rich context for understanding the administrative and ethical frameworks exemplified by figures like Hang Tuah.

Primary Sources:

- Hikayat Hang Tuah (Shellabear, 1908; Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1975)
- Sejarah Melayu (Tun Seri Lanang, 1612)
- 16th–17th century Portuguese and Dutch records (Cortesão, 1944)
- Malay manuscripts from the National Library of Indonesia, British Library, and Leiden University Library

Secondary Sources:

- Modern scholarship on Malay history and politics (Andaya & Andaya, 2015; Milner, 2011; Hooker, 1983)
- Public administration theory (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007; Frederickson, 2005; Stillman, 2010)
- Bureaucratic ethics and leadership studies in Southeast Asia (Haque, 2010; Siddique, 2008)

3.3 Data Collection Techniques

Library research involved critical reading, historiographic study, and academic literature review. Procedures included:

- Source Inventory: Identifying and classifying manuscripts and modern works on Hang Tuah and Malay administration.
- Textual and Contextual Analysis: Hermeneutic reading of texts to understand sociopolitical contexts (Ricoeur, 1981).
- Coding and Thematic Categorization: Developing themes such as amanah, loyalty, hierarchy, and daulat.
- Synthesis and Interpretation: Linking historical evidence with modern public administration theory.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through combined hermeneutic and thematic-administrative methods:

- Hermeneutic Analysis: Extracts symbolic meaning from classical texts (Gadamer, 2004).
- Thematic-Administrative Analysis: Interprets moral and administrative values within contemporary public administration frameworks (Frederickson, 2005; Denhardt, 2011).

3.5 Data Validity

Triangulation of sources (primary texts, modern interpretations, and administrative theory) ensured credibility (Denzin, 2012). Historical verification linked Hang Tuah's narrative to documented events. Audit trails recorded analytical steps, enabling reproducibility by other researchers.

Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores Hang Tuah as both a historical and conceptual figure, embodying principles of practical administration within classical Malay governance. The analysis is structured around three distinct layers, each revealing different dimensions of his leadership, ethical conduct, and influence on administrative practices. By examining these layers, the study highlights how Hang Tuah's actions and decisions reflect broader socio-political and cultural norms of the Malay world. This approach not only situates him within historical contexts but also interprets his role as a model for understanding the application of governance ethics in traditional Malay polities. The analysis focuses on three layers:

- Historical interpretation of Malay administrative structures.
- Ethical and leadership values reflected in Hang Tuah's actions.
- Conceptual dialogue between classical Malay governance and modern public administration theory.

4.2 Hang Tuah as an Ethical Administrator

Hang Tuah stands as a paragon of administrative ethics, deeply rooted in loyalty, integrity, and a profound sense of public responsibility. His conduct consistently embodies the Malay principle of amanah, demonstrating trustworthiness in the careful execution of royal orders. Beyond mere obedience, he balances authority with wisdom, ensuring that the welfare

and harmony of society are preserved. Through his actions, Hang Tuah illustrates how ethical leadership can unite duty to the ruler with moral accountability to the people, offering a timeless model of governance where loyalty, integrity, and social harmony coexist seamlessly.

Key Findings:

Hang Tuah stands out as a figure who embodies an ethical balance between personal loyalty and the stability of the governing system. His allegiance to the Sultan was not blind obedience, but a form of strategic alignment with the administrative and political goals of the sultanate. In every action, he considered the impact on social order and the sustainability of governance, demonstrating that true loyalty can coexist with prudence in decision-making.

Hang Tuah's moral courage is evident when confronting political rivals or acting as a mediator in inter-state disputes. In such situations, he placed ethical principles above personal gain, affirming the value of maruah or honor as the foundation of his conduct. This approach portrays a leader who can balance self-interest with public responsibility, offering a model of integrity that remains relevant today.

Moreover, his competence in managing military duties, diplomacy, and policy implementation reflects a structured administrative ability akin to modern managerial functions. Hang Tuah efficiently handled multiple roles, maintained bureaucratic discipline, and ensured the continuity of strategic decisions. Thus, he emerges not only as a symbol of loyalty and courage but also as an exemplar of integrated administrative ethics, where integrity, skill, and public responsibility form a harmonious whole.

Discussion:

These characteristics closely reflect the ethical foundations of modern public administration, particularly the principles of accountability, servant leadership, and integrity (Denhardt & Catlaw, 2015; Frederickson, 2005). Hang Tuah's conduct illustrates that governance in the precolonial Malay context was not solely based on hierarchical authority, but also demonstrated operational sophistication and ethical guidance. His actions reveal a system in which leaders were expected to balance formal duties with moral responsibility, ensuring that decisions served both the ruler and the broader society. This historical example underscores that effective governance required more than command structures; it depended on ethical discernment, strategic judgment, and the capacity to act with integrity in complex social and political environments (Denhardt & Catlaw, 2015; Frederickson, 2005). By examining Hang Tuah's role, we see that pre-colonial administrative practices anticipated many of the core values emphasized in contemporary public administration, showing a continuity between historical and modern concepts of leadership, accountability, and ethical management.

4.3 Power Structure and Governance

During the Malacca Sultanate, Malay governance operated through a dual-layered system. The Sultan embodied both spiritual and symbolic authority, known as daulat, serving as the central figure of legitimacy and moral guidance. Meanwhile, the practical aspects of administration were handled by key officials such as the Bendahara, Temenggung, Laksamana, and other functionaries. These officers were responsible for executing policies, maintaining order, and managing the day-to-day affairs of the state. This division of power created a balance between ceremonial leadership and bureaucratic management, ensuring that the Sultan's

overarching authority was supported by a structured and capable administrative framework. The system reflects an early model of governance where symbolic legitimacy and technical competence worked together to maintain stability and effective rule.

Findings:

- 1. Hang Tuah acted as a bridge between royal authority and operational governance, ensuring policy implementation aligned with royal legitimacy.
- 2. Decision-making combined consultation (musyawarah) and wisdom (hikmah), promoting administrative efficiency without undermining hierarchical order.
- 3. His assignments often required inter-institutional coordination, reflecting early principles of bureaucratic interdependence.

Discussion:

The Malay governance model reflects ideas aligned with modern organizational theory, where legitimacy, formal hierarchical structures, and networked collaboration operate simultaneously (Mintzberg, 1979; Braginsky, 2004). This is evident in the administrative practices of the Malay Sultanates, where rulers relied not only on official positions to assert authority but also on personal relationships and social networks to enhance governmental effectiveness. In this context, the figure of Hang Tuah serves as a concrete example of how principles of rational administration were historically implemented. His roles as an official, advisor, and diplomat demonstrate that administration depended not solely on formal regulations but also on an individual's capacity to navigate social, political, and cultural complexities. History indicates that these practices have a long-standing continuity in Southeast Asia, suggesting that concepts of bureaucracy, legitimacy, and collaboration are not purely modern inventions but have existed and evolved over time (Mintzberg, 1979; Braginsky, 2004). Therefore, Malay governance offers valuable insights into the integration of formal hierarchy and social networks in administration, as well as the significance of figures like Hang Tuah in maintaining stability and administrative effectiveness in traditional governance.

4.4 Applied Administrative Values

Hang Tuah's administrative practices demonstrate five core applied values:

- 1. Strategic Planning: Aligning military and diplomatic missions with Sultanate objectives.
- 2. Risk Management: Assessing political threats and managing internal conflicts without destabilizing governance.
- 3. Resource Allocation: Ensuring optimal deployment of personnel and supplies for naval and diplomatic operations.
- 4. Ethical Decision-Making: Applying amanah and maruah as guiding principles.
- 5. Adaptive Leadership: Responding to dynamic political and social challenges while maintaining systemic stability.

Discussion:

These values align closely with modern principles of public administration, including strategic management, ethical governance, and adaptive leadership (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). Within the context of a patronage-based monarchy, Hang Tuah serves as a prominent example of how moral and operational rationality can be effectively integrated. His actions illustrate that governance in historical Malay society was not solely about exercising power or following

formal procedures, but also about upholding ethical standards and strategically navigating complex political relationships. By combining moral integrity with practical administrative skills, Hang Tuah demonstrates the ways in which leadership could adapt to dynamic social and political circumstances while maintaining the legitimacy of the ruler. This historical example highlights the continuity of principles that remain relevant in contemporary public administration, emphasizing that effective leadership requires both ethical judgment and operational competence (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). Consequently, Hang Tuah's role provides a valuable lens for understanding the interplay between ethics, strategy, and adaptability in governance, illustrating that these principles are not only modern constructs but have deep roots in Southeast Asian administrative traditions.

4.5 Dialogue with Modern Public Administration Theory

Integrating Hang Tuah's administrative behavior with modern theory yields insights into governance ethics and institutional design:

- 1. Servant Leadership: Emphasizing duty to the community and ethical stewardship (Greenleaf, 1977).
- 2. Bureaucratic Integrity: Balancing formal hierarchy with moral accountability (Frederickson, 2005).
- 3. Moral Imagination: Applying culturally rooted ethical reasoning in administrative decision-making (Denhardt & Catlaw, 2015).
- 4. Adaptive Governance: Demonstrating flexibility to navigate complex political and social environments (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Discussion:

The historical account of Hang Tuah underscores that ethical and strategic administration is not exclusively a modern concept, but rather a recurring principle in effective governance. His example demonstrates how the actions and decisions of historical figures can provide valuable insights for contemporary public administration, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts where cultural values continue to play a significant role. Hang Tuah's blend of moral integrity, operational competence, and adaptive leadership illustrates that governance has long required a balance between ethical judgment and practical strategy. By examining such historical precedents, modern administrators can better understand how culturally grounded principles—such as loyalty, ethical responsibility, and relational diplomacy—can inform contemporary frameworks of leadership and organizational management. This continuity between past and present emphasizes that effective governance is not solely a matter of formal rules or structures, but also of embedding ethical reasoning and strategic thinking within the administrative process, demonstrating that the lessons of figures like Hang Tuah remain highly relevant today.

4.5 Implications for Contemporary Administration

- Ethics and Accountability: Historical ethics can guide contemporary policy-making and bureaucratic behavior.
- Cultural Integration: Understanding indigenous administrative norms enriches modern governance practices.

- Leadership Training: Hang Tuah's example suggests embedding historical and moral lessons into leadership curricula.
- Institutional Design: Combining formal hierarchy with consultation and adaptive problem-solving enhances institutional resilience.

Conclusion

This study positions Hang Tuah not merely as a legendary Malay hero but as a historical figure embodying applied administration within the 15th-century Malacca Sultanate. The research highlights several key findings:

- 1. Applied Administrative Ethics: Hang Tuah operationalized Malay ethical principles—amanah (trust), maruah (honor), and daulat (sovereignty)—as practical guides for governance, diplomacy, and military leadership. These values functioned as moral and operational pillars within the administrative system.
- 2. Integrated Governance Approach: Hang Tuah acted as a mediator between royal authority and bureaucratic operations, ensuring coordination between strategic objectives, ethical norms, and operational efficiency. His leadership reflected a protobureaucratic model blending hierarchical command with moral responsibility.
- 3. Historical Continuity of Administration: The Malacca Sultanate demonstrates that precolonial Southeast Asia had governance systems characterized by rationality, accountability, and ethical orientation, long before the introduction of Western administrative models.

In summary, Hang Tuah exemplifies a value-based administrator who bridges ethical, strategic, and operational dimensions of governance. His historical narrative provides a lens to reinterpret Malay administration as a sophisticated system integrating moral accountability and public service ethics.

5.1 Policy and Theoretical Implications

1. Relevance for Contemporary Public Administration:

The ethical principles embodied by Hang Tuah—loyalty to institutional trust, moral integrity, and social accountability—can inform modern bureaucratic reform in Southeast Asia. Public officials can benefit from integrating culturally grounded ethical frameworks alongside procedural compliance.

2. Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge in Governance:

Policymakers should recognize that indigenous administrative practices contain operational and ethical insights relevant for adaptive governance, conflict resolution, and leadership training. Embedding these lessons in public administration curricula can strengthen governance legitimacy and effectiveness.

3. Leadership Development and Moral Imagination:

Hang Tuah's example underscores the importance of cultivating leadership that combines professional competence, ethical reasoning, and cultural awareness. Training programs should emphasize moral imagination, adaptive decision-making, and integrative problem-solving to prepare administrators for complex socio-political environments.

4. Cross-Cultural Governance Models:

The study demonstrates that historical Malay administration provides a model for understanding governance in multicultural and multi-ethnic contexts. Lessons from Hang Tuah's applied administration may guide contemporary efforts in institutional design, particularly in maritime governance and decentralized administrative systems.

5.2 Final Remark

Hang Tuah's historical narrative demonstrates that governance in Southeast Asia was not merely procedural but fundamentally ethical and culturally grounded. His legacy provides both conceptual and practical foundations for contemporary public administration, connecting centuries-old indigenous knowledge with modern theories of governance. By reinterpreting historical figures such as Hang Tuah, scholars and practitioners can gain insights that enrich administrative scholarship, support innovative policy design, and foster leadership guided by values, ethical principles, and social responsibility. This perspective highlights the enduring relevance of historical precedents, showing that effective governance relies not only on formal structures and procedures but also on moral judgment, cultural awareness, and the capacity to act in the public interest. Hang Tuah's example thus serves as a bridge between past and present, demonstrating that lessons from Southeast Asia's administrative history can meaningfully inform contemporary leadership and organizational practice.

Final Conclusion

This study positions Hang Tuah not merely as a legendary Malay hero but as a conceptual figure representing applied administration within the traditional governance of the Nusantara. Through an in-depth reading of Hikayat Hang Tuah and Sejarah Melayu, and interpretation of the fifteenth-century Malacca Sultanate's administrative structure, it is revealed that values such as amanah (trustworthiness), maruah (honor), daulat (sovereignty), and loyalty are not merely personal ethical principles but form the pillars of a traditional public administration system that sustains political legitimacy and social stability (Andaya & Andaya, 2015; Milner, 2011).

Historically, the governance of the Malacca Sultanate demonstrates an integration of political authority, cultural morality, and bureaucratic discipline oriented toward service to both sovereign and people. Hang Tuah functions as a "moral administrator"—an executor of governance balancing hierarchical obedience with ethical responsibility for justice and social harmony (Milgram, 2018). This indicates that the administrative structure of the period already incorporated rational-ethical dimensions similar to those found in modern administrative theory.

When compared with modern public administration frameworks such as Max Weber's rational-legal bureaucracy (Weber, 1947), Denhardt & Denhardt's New Public Service (2003), and Frederickson's social equity theory (1997), Hang Tuah's administrative values exhibit parallel tendencies: emphasis on honesty, loyalty, and moral accountability in public service. However, the uniqueness of the Malay system lies in its integration of spiritual and cultural dimensions, making administrative ethics not merely procedural but a moral devotion to cosmic and social order.

In conclusion, Hang Tuah represents a prototype of state apparatus who internalizes ethical values, loyalty, and public responsibility. He not only executes the Sultan's orders but also maintains a balance between power and morality, between bureaucratic duty and spiritual service. This figure embodies a model of value-based administration highly relevant to contemporary Indonesian contexts. The study suggests that integrating local historical ethical paradigms into modern public administration can strengthen moral governance, cultivate bureaucratic integrity, and enhance culturally rooted administrative practice.

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