# Three Styles, One Hero: A Semiotic Analysis of Jaafar Taib's Visual Interpretations of Hang Tuah (1977, 1984, 1988)

**Walid Muhammad Syafrein Effendi[1]*, Fadly Dato' Mohamed Sharif[2], Musaddiq Mohamad Khalil[3], Dr. Muhammad Nur Firdaus Nasir[4], Shafiyah Mohamad Khalil[5]**

**[1-4]Fakulti Seni Lukis dan Seni Reka, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Melaka, Kampus Alor Gajah, Melaka, Malaysia**

**[5]Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia**

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## ABSTRACT

Hikayat Hang Tuah is one of the most widely adapted texts in Malay literature, yet scholarship on its adaptations has centred on film. This study examines the Malaysian illustrator Jaafar Taib (b. 1952), who drew Hang Tuah as a comic three times: in the student magazine Medan Pelajar (1977), in the newspaper Berita Harian Mingguan (1984) and, in colour, in the comic magazine Fantasi (1988). Treating each version as an intersemiotic translation, the study asks how his drawing style differs across the three versions, what meanings of heroism and Malay identity each style constructs, and how his interpretation of the hero developed. A qualitative comparative design was used, grounded in Barthes' orders of signification and Peirce's typology of signs.

The analysis compared two consecutive pages of one episode drawn in all three versions, in which the young Hang Tuah finds a Cintamani snake and presents it to the Bendahara, and checked the findings against a second episode and a printed colour page. Each page was coded under four categories: line and rendering, face and physique, costume and headgear, and composition and panel design. Three distinct styles emerged. The 1977 version uses clean, decorative line to present an exemplary, well-dressed Malay youth.

The 1984 version uses loose, cross-hatched naturalism to recast Tuah as a rustic village boy. The 1988 version uses dramatic, high-contrast rendering to anticipate the warrior. While the captions remain almost unchanged, the images shift the hero's meaning from propriety to ordinariness to heroic action. As a focused reading of one matched episode, the study argues that each version reinterprets the epic in ways consistent with its venue and readership, and it positions the Malaysian illustrator as an active interpreter of classical literature.

**Keywords:** Jaafar Taib, Hang Tuah, drawing style, visual semiotics, Malaysian comics

## INTRODUCTION

Hang Tuah is the archetypal hero of the Malay world. The Hikayat Hang Tuah presents him as the loyal laksamana of fifteenth-century Melaka, serving Sultan Mansur Shah (Kassim Ahmad, 1966; Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2010). Few Malay narratives have been retold as often. Hang Tuah has been adapted for the screen in Hang Tuah (1956), for the stage, for television and for comics (Nagarajah & Yaapar, 2023; Hamadun et al., 2021). Hang Tuah also appears in some of the earliest Malay comic books. Nasjah Djamin published Hang Tuah (Untuk Anak-Anak) in 1951 (Mazelan Anuar, 2024).

Every visual adaptation must decide what the hero looks like. It must commit to a face, a physique, a costume and a setting, and it must render them in a particular way. Jakobson (1959) calls this movement from words into another sign system intersemiotic translation. In comics, the illustrator is the translator, and drawing style is the medium of translation. Style is not neutral. The weight of a line, the amount of black, the proportions of

a body and the shape of a panel all carry meaning (McCloud, 1993; Eisner, 1985). The same sentence of a story can therefore produce very different heroes on the page.

Jaafar Taib offers a rare case for studying these choices. He was born in Melaka in 1952 and is a self-taught illustrator. He co-founded Creative Enterprise in 1976, the publisher behind Gila-Gila, Fantasi and Bambino (Galeri Khazanah, n.d.). He helped shape the early direction of Gila-Gila, which launched on 1 April 1978 and became central to Malaysian cartoon culture (Muliyadi Mahamood, 2010).

He drew Hang Tuah as a comic at least three times. Mishar co-wrote the first version, which appeared in the student magazine Medan Pelajar in 1977. A second version appeared in the newspaper Berita Harian Mingguan in 1984, and a third, in colour, in Fantasi from 1988, continuing into 1989. One illustrator returning to the same epic three times in eleven years, for three different venues, allows readers to trace his changing interpretation directly.

**The Problem.** Studies of Hang Tuah adaptations have focused on film and on fidelity to the source text (Hamadun et al., 2021; Nagarajah & Yaapar, 2023). Malaysian comics scholarship has focused largely on humour magazines and editorial cartoons (Muliyadi Mahamood, 2010; Lent, 2015). Scholars rarely study illustrators as interpreters of the texts they adapt, and Malaysian comic artists' drawing styles have received little analytical attention. No study has compared Jaafar Taib's Hang Tuah versions. His original artwork is also ageing, with yellowed paste-up lettering, staining and ink loss, which makes documentation urgent.

**The Objectives.** This study aims:

- To identify the drawing styles Jaafar Taib used in his 1977, 1984 and 1988 versions of Hang Tuah, in line and rendering, face and physique, costume and headgear, and composition and panel design.
- To analyse the meanings of heroism and Malay identity that each style constructs, at the levels of denotation, connotation and myth.
- To explain how Jaafar Taib's visual interpretation of Hang Tuah developed across the three versions, in relation to their publication venues.

**The Research Questions:**

a) How does Jaafar Taib's drawing style differ across his 1977, 1984 and 1988 versions of Hang Tuah?

b) What meanings of heroism and Malay identity does each style construct?

c) How did his visual interpretation of the hero develop across the three versions and their venues?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Hikayat Hang Tuah and its afterlives

The Hikayat Hang Tuah is a long prose epic of the Malay court tradition. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka published its standard romanised edition (Kassim Ahmad, 1966), and Muhammad Haji Salleh (2010) translated it into English. Braginsky (2004) places it within the heritage of traditional Malay literature, where the hero embodies the ideal of service to the ruler. Modern readings have contested that ideal. The conflict between Hang Tuah's absolute loyalty and Hang Jebat's rebellion became a central debate in post-independence Malay thought.

Adaptation scholarship has followed the hero into other media. Hamadun et al. (2021) analysed the stylistics of Hang Tuah (1956), finding that it leaned toward a Hollywood production model. Nagarajah and Yaapar (2023) traced Hang Tuah into Shyam Benegal's Indian docudrama Bharat Ek Khoj, reading him as a Malay culture hero. These studies show that each medium re-frames the hero. Comics, however, are largely absent from this body of work.

### Malay and Malaysian comics

Malay comic books emerged after 1945, building on newspaper cartoons in Warta Jenaka (1936) and Utusan Zaman (1939) (Mazelan Anuar, 2024). Early titles drew heavily on legend and history, including a 1951 children's Hang Tuah comic. Lent (2015) situates Malaysian comics within the wider history of Asian comics. In Malaysia, the 1970s and 1980s brought a boom led by humour magazines. Gila-Gila, launched in 1978 under the early direction of Jaafar Taib and colleagues, nurtured a generation of cartoonists (Muliyadi Mahamood, 2010). Most scholarship from this period examines humour and caricature. Serious historical or epic graphic narratives, such as Jaafar Taib's Hang Tuah, have received far less attention.

### Drawing style as a sign system

Drawing style is one of the main ways a comic makes meaning. McCloud (1993) shows that line itself is expressive: its weight, direction and texture convey mood before any word is read. He also shows that the degree of abstraction in a drawn face shapes how readers relate to a character. A simplified, iconic face invites identification, while a detailed, realistic one presents the character as a distinct other. Eisner (1985) notes that comics rely on recognisable visual types, in which physique, costume and posture signal a character's role. Cohn (2013) treats such recurring graphic conventions as the vocabulary of a visual language. Groensteen (2007) adds that page layout and panel design organise how that vocabulary is read across a whole work.

### Semiotics and visual interpretation

Semiotics studies how signs make meaning. Peirce (1931–1958) distinguished three kinds of sign: the icon, which resembles its object; the index, which is causally linked to it; and the symbol, which signifies by convention. Barthes (1972, 1977) proposed orders of signification. Denotation is the literal content of an image. Connotation is the cultural meaning it carries. Myth is the naturalised ideology that makes those meanings seem self-evident. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) extended these ideas into a grammar of visual design, addressing gaze, angle and framing.

Jakobson (1959) defines intersemiotic translation as interpreting verbal signs through non-verbal sign systems. Hutcheon (2006) argues that adaptation is repetition without replication: each retelling is a creative and interpretive act. Together, these frameworks allow Jaafar Taib's three versions to be read as one illustrator's evolving interpretation of the epic hero.

### Research gap

Existing studies examine what adaptations change in plot and medium, but rarely how drawing style changes a hero's meaning. No study has applied semiotic analysis to the drawing styles of a Malaysian comic artist, or compared one illustrator's successive versions of the same epic. This study addresses that gap.

## METHODOLOGY

**Research design.** This study uses a qualitative, interpretive design. It combines a comparative case study with visual semiotic analysis. The case is Jaafar Taib's visual interpretation of Hang Tuah, read through three embedded units: the 1977, 1984 and 1988 versions.

**Corpus and sampling.** We used a matched-episode design, which trades breadth for control. The main corpus is one episode that appears in all three versions. In it, the young Hang Tuah and his companions gather food on an island. Tuah finds a Cintamani snake in a bunch of ripe bananas, keeps it in his destar, and later shows it to the Bendahara. Two consecutive pages of this episode were taken from each version: the finding of the snake (Figures 1–3) and its presentation to the Bendahara (Figures 4–6). To check whether the styles hold beyond this episode, a second episode was added where material allowed: the building of the ghali, from part 10 of the 1984 and 1988–1989 serials (Figures 7–8). No 1977 version of this episode survives in the authors' archive.

The Cintamani episode was chosen for four reasons. First, it is one of the few episodes that survives in all three versions. In the first author's archive, the 1977 and 1988 boards are limited, while most surviving material comes from the 1984 serial. Second, the episode appears in all three versions with nearly identical captions, so the verbal content is held almost constant. Third, it presents Hang Tuah as the central figure, alongside his companions and the Bendahara, so all four coding categories can be observed. Fourth, it combines figures, landscape, a symbolic object and a meeting with the court, which gives each version scope to show its range of rendering. Because the words are held nearly constant, differences between the pages can be read as differences of visual interpretation. Visual interpretation is understood broadly here. It includes the illustrator's own choices, but also the conditions under which he worked, such as page format, editorial requirements, print technology and the stage of the artwork. The findings are therefore a focused interpretation of one episode, checked against a second, not a comprehensive account of Jaafar Taib's stylistic development across eleven years.

The Cintamani pages are Jaafar Taib's original artwork boards, scanned by the first author at 600 dpi. The 1977 boards carry pasted-up lettering. The 1984 and 1988 Cintamani boards carry pencilled lettering guides, which shows that they were captured before final lettering. The 1984 ghali board (Figure 7) is finished artwork with pasted-up lettering. Figure 8 is a printed colour page from Fantasi, August 1989, page 15. Apart from this page, exact issue numbers and publication dates could not be determined. The versions are therefore placed in context by year and venue, and finer historical claims, such as links to particular editorial periods, cannot be made.

Using the 1988 ink work for the Cintamani pages has implications for the analysis. Line and rendering, face and physique, and composition and panel design are fully present in the ink work, and costume and headgear can be read from its forms. What the ink work cannot show is colour. In print, colour would have added further connotations, for example through skin tones, the colours of costume and court dress, and the mood of the jungle, and it could have changed the visual weight of elements such as the snake.

No printed colour copy of the Cintamani pages was available. The printed page in Figure 8 allows a limited check of how colour works in the same serial, but the 1988 Cintamani findings still describe the drawing that underlies the published page, not the full visual language readers saw.

**Analytical framework.** Each page was analysed in three stages, following Barthes (1977). Stage 1 records the denotation: what is literally depicted. Stage 2 reads the connotation: the cultural meanings of those elements within Malay visual culture. Stage 3 identifies the myth: the ideology about heroism and Malayness that the image naturalises. At each stage, signs were also classified as icon, index or symbol (Peirce, 1931–1958). Table 1 sets out the four coding categories.

**Table 1: Coding frame for drawing style**

| Category | What is coded | Guiding source |
|---|---|---|
| Line and rendering | Line weight and quality, hatching and cross-hatching, use of solid black, degree of finish | McCloud (1993); Eisner (1985) |
| Face and physique | Facial features, apparent age, proportion, idealised vs naturalistic rendering | McCloud (1993); Cohn (2013) |
| Costume and headgear | Destar or headband, baju, samping, ornament | Barthes (1977); Peirce (1931–1958) |
| Composition and panel design | Framing, angle, figure scale, panel shape and borders, lettering | Kress & van Leeuwen (2006); Groensteen (2007) |

**Comparison.** After coding, we set the results for each category side by side across the three versions. We then considered how each version's venue and likely readership might relate to these shifts. Because no editorial records or audience data were available, these links are offered as interpretations, not as established causes.

**Coding and validation.** The first author coded each page using the frame in Table 1, recording every observation in a coding log under the four categories and the three orders of meaning. The results were summarised in Table 2. Two co-authors (FDMS and MMK), who had not taken part in the coding, then reviewed it independently.

Each compared the coding log and Table 2 against Figures 1–3 and answered three structured questions: whether they agreed with each cell of Table 2, whether the dominant meaning assigned to each version fitted the evidence, and whether any significant visual feature had been missed. Both reviewers agreed with every cell and with the three dominant meanings.

One reviewer identified a further pattern, the change in facial expression across the versions, which the coding had recorded but not developed. The team discussed this point, re-examined the three figures together, and added it to the discussion. No disagreement over an existing reading arose, so no further resolution step was needed. Figures 4–8, added during revision, were coded by the first author with the same frame and reviewed independently by the same two co-authors in the same way.

**Researcher positionality and reflexivity.** The first author is a practising illustrator and was commissioned by ITBM to scan, restore and remaster Jaafar Taib's Hang Tuah artwork. This position brings advantages: direct access to the original boards and technical knowledge of ink, paste-up and print processes. It also brings risks. Long familiarity and professional admiration for the artist could encourage readings that are too generous, and involvement in a remastered edition gives the first author an interest in presenting the material as significant. Four measures were taken to limit these risks.

First, the analysis used unrestored scans of the original boards, not the remastered versions. Second, the analysis followed an explicit coding frame (Table 1) drawn from established comics and semiotic theory, which constrained what was recorded. Third, two co-authors who had not coded the material reviewed every reading independently. Fourth, each claim is tied to features visible in Figures 1–8, so that readers can check the interpretations against the evidence.

**Ethics.** The study analyses published material and original artwork. The artist, Jaafar Taib, consented to his original artwork being scanned, analysed, and reproduced in this study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All three pages tell the same moment in nearly the same words. The 1977 caption reads "Hang Tuah terjumpa sepohon pisang. Buahnya sedang masak ranum", and the pencilled guides on the 1984 and 1988 boards repeat this wording with only minor changes. Because the words stay almost constant, the differences between the pages reflect visual interpretation. Each version is discussed in turn, followed by a comparison.

**The 1977 version: decorative clarity**




**Figure 1:** Jaafar Taib (illustrator) and Mishar (story), Hang Tuah, Medan Pelajar (1977). The Cintamani snake episode. Original artwork, scanned by the first author. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

**Line and rendering.** The 1977 page is drawn with a clean, confident contour line of fairly even weight (Figure 1). Solid black is placed boldly in the hair, the shadows and the undergrowth. The foliage is stylised into decorative, patterned clumps rather than observed leaves. There is little hatching. The result reads clearly even at a small printed size.

**Face and physique.** Tuah and his companions are drawn as children. Their faces are round and smooth, with large, calm eyes and little individual detail. In McCloud's (1993) terms, these simplified faces lean toward the iconic, which invites young readers to identify with the hero.

**Costume and headgear.** This version gives the fullest costume. Tuah wears a destar tied with a peaked fold, a collared baju with buttons, sleeves edged with geometric bands, and a patterned sash. The boys are dressed formally even while foraging in the forest. The destar works here as a symbol, in Peirce's sense, of Malay male identity and adab. It also anticipates the court dress Tuah will later wear.

**Composition and panel design.** The page follows a regular rectangular grid. The opening panel shows Tuah in a frontal, eye-level, half-length view holding the bananas, composed almost like a formal portrait. The snake is a small detail within the bunch. A dialogue panel follows, in which a companion addresses him as "Abang Tuah". A wide final panel shows three boys rowing home toward a hill, with the caption "berdayung pulang ke Bentan". Captions sit in neat boxes and carry much of the narration.

**Meaning.** At the level of connotation, the page signals order, propriety and cultural correctness. At the level of myth, it presents Hang Tuah as the model Malay pupil, whose virtue is visible in neat dress and composure. This treatment is consistent with a student magazine, where the hero could double as an example of good conduct.

**The 1984 version: sketchy naturalism**

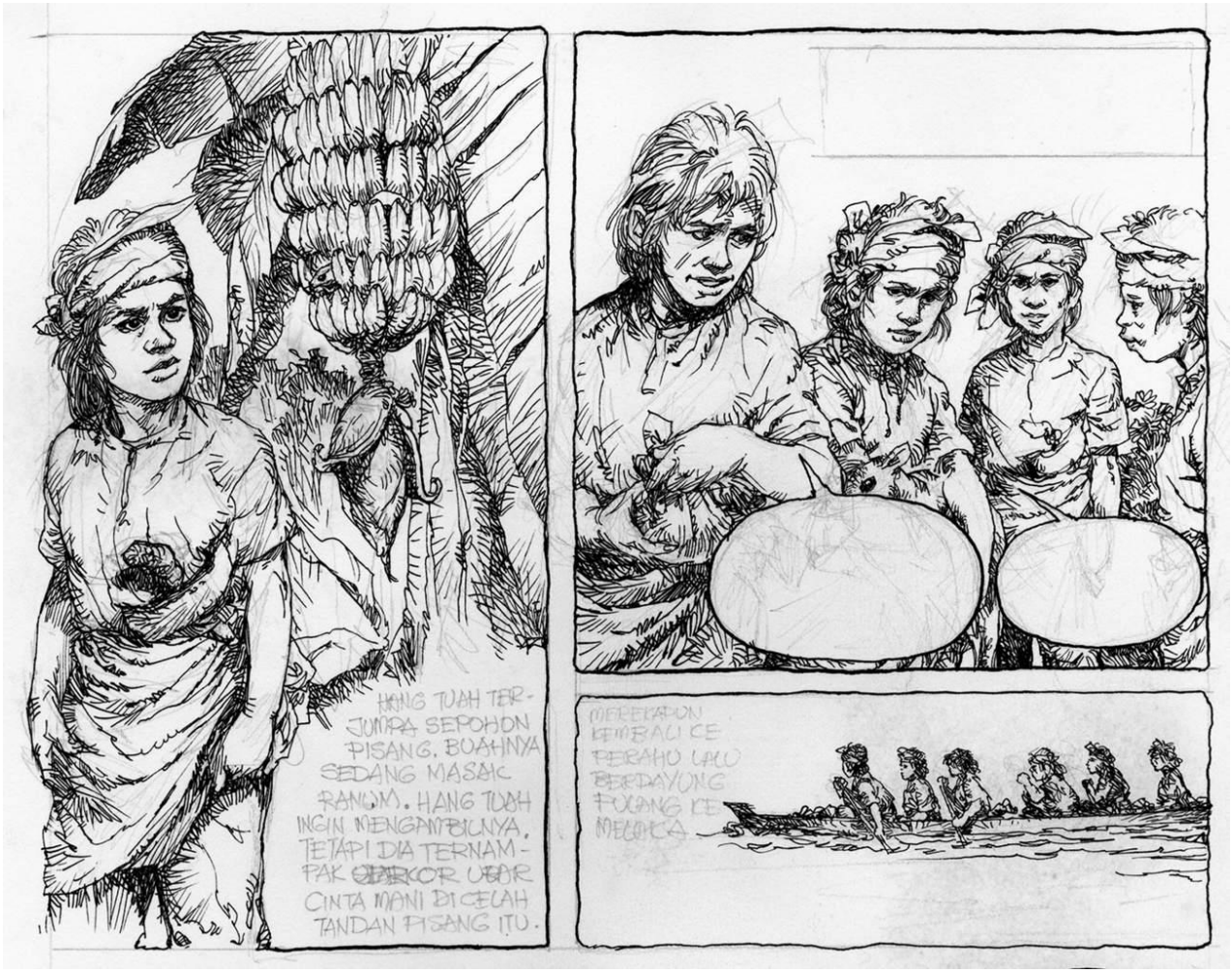



**Figure 2:** Jaafar Taib, Hang Tuah, Berita Harian Mingguan (1984). The Cintamani snake episode. Original artwork with pencilled lettering guides, scanned by the first author. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

**Line and rendering.** The 1984 page is drawn with a fine pen in a loose, searching line (Figure 2). Form is built through layered hatching and cross-hatching, and the pencil underdrawing remains visible. Solid blacks are few, so the page is light in tone. It reads less like a conventional comic and more like an observed sketch or book illustration. Part of this sketchy quality reflects the board's working stage, since the pencil guides were still to be replaced by final lettering. The finished 1984 board in Figure 7 shows a firmer line, but the same naturalism and light tone.

**Face and physique.** The boys are now adolescents. Their hair is unkempt, their brows furrowed and their faces individual. Tuah's expression is wary as he notices the snake. Their bodies are naturally proportioned, and their clothes hang and crease like real cloth.

**Costume and headgear.** The peaked destar is gone. Tuah's head cloth is wrapped loosely, with hair escaping beneath it. His baju is plain, without ornament, and his sarong is crumpled. The head cloth now reads as an index of work and village life rather than a symbol of rank.

**Composition and panel design.** A tall vertical panel shows Tuah full-figure beneath a towering banana tree, with the snake subtly visible, coiled in the bunch. Nature dominates the frame. A second panel lines up four boys, with Tuah older-looking at the left. The final panel reduces the boys to small silhouettes in a long boat on a wide horizon. Panel borders are hand-drawn with rounded corners. The pencilled caption also changes the boys' destination, from "pulang ke Bentan" in 1977 to "pulang ke Melaka". The 1984 text relocates the episode closer to the Melaka of the later epic.

**Meaning.** The page connotes authenticity, rural realism and ordinary humanity. Its myth is Hang Tuah as a son of the kampung, whose heroism is rooted in everyday Malay village life. This quieter, more literary treatment is consistent with a general newspaper readership.

**The 1988 version: dramatic adventure realism**



**Figure 3:** Jaafar Taib, Hang Tuah, Fantasi (1988). The Cintamani snake episode. Original black-and-white ink work for the colour version, scanned by the first author. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

**Line and rendering.** The 1988 page combines bold, heavy blacks with feathered hatching (Figure 3). Strong contrasts of light and shadow model the figures, and the jungle is rendered as dense texture. The line art is built to hold its structure under colour in the printed magazine.

**Face and physique.** The boys have become young men. Their jaws are angular, their features defined and their expressions intense. Their forearms are muscular, and their layered hair recalls the popular adventure illustration style of the 1980s.

**Costume and headgear.** Tuah wears a narrow headband tied at the back with trailing ends, and his baju is open at the neck with sleeves pushed up. This is an action costume. Ornament appears instead on the Datuk Bendahara, who meets the boys at the end of the page in patterned court dress. His rich costume contrasts with the plain dress of the boys and brings the court into the frame for the first time in the episode, anticipating Tuah's future service.

**Composition and panel design.** The panels are wide and cinematic, with figures arranged in depth. The boys are seen from behind and in foreshortening as they push the boat, watched by a crowd of villagers. In the

opening panel, Tuah turns and gestures toward the viewer while a large patterned snake hangs from the bananas at his eye level. The snake is no longer a detail but a visible threat.

**Meaning.** The page connotes energy, danger and adventure. Its myth is Hang Tuah as a warrior in the making, an action hero already moving toward the court. This is consistent with the position of Fantasi as a commercial comic magazine of the late-1980s boom (Galeri Khazanah, n.d.).

**Testing the styles beyond the first page**

To test whether the three styles hold beyond a single page, we examined the next page of the Cintamani episode in each version, and a second episode drawn in two of the versions.




**Figure 4:** Jaafar Taib (illustrator) and Mishar (story), Hang Tuah, Medan Pelajar (1977). Hang Tuah presents the Cintamani snake to the Bendahara. Original artwork, scanned by the first author. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

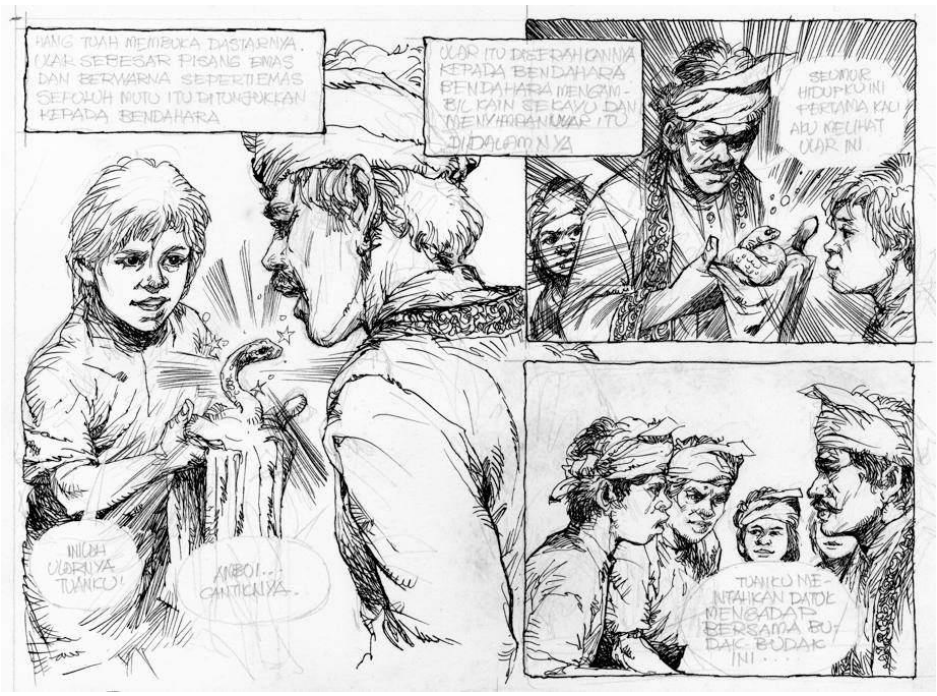



**Figure 5:** Jaafar Taib, Hang Tuah, Berita Harian Mingguan (1984). Hang Tuah presents the Cintamani snake to the Bendahara. Original artwork with pencilled lettering guides, scanned by the first author. Reproduced with permission of the artist.



**Figure 6:** Jaafar Taib, Hang Tuah, Fantasi (1988). Hang Tuah presents the Cintamani snake to the Bendahara. Original black-and-white ink work for the colour version, scanned by the first author. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

**The second Cintamani page.** Again, the words barely change. The 1977 caption reads “Hang Tuah membuka dastar. Ular sebesar pisang emas dan berwarna seperti emas sepuluh mutu itu ditunjukkannya kepada Bendahara”. The 1984 and 1988 guides repeat this wording closely. The drawing, however, follows the same three styles.

The 1977 page keeps its clean contour, heavy solid blacks, patterned cuffs and calm, composed faces (Figure 4). The 1984 page keeps its loose fine-pen line and individual faces, now showing Tuah's open delight and the Bendahara's wonder (Figure 5). The 1988 page keeps its heavy blacks, feathered hatching, headbands and intense expressions, framed over the shoulder in strong backlight (Figure 6).

**Two patterns sharpened.** The second page also sharpens two of the patterns found on the first. The snake's magic is shown more strongly in each version. In 1977, its golden colour is stated only in the caption. In 1984, small sparkle strokes surround it. In 1988, radiant light fills the panel, so the image now does work that the caption did in 1977.

The distance between the boys and the court also widens. In 1977, the Bendahara and one of the boys wear the same zigzag-patterned headgear, so propriety is shared. In 1984, the Bendahara's embroidered collar and folded headdress set him moderately apart. In 1988, his tall tanjak and rich dress contrast strongly with the boys' plain headbands.




**Figure 7:** Jaafar Taib, Hang Tuah, Berita Harian Mingguan (1984), part 10. Hang Tuah and the Bendahara Paduka Raja help to build the ghali. Original finished artwork with pasted-up lettering, scanned by the first author. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

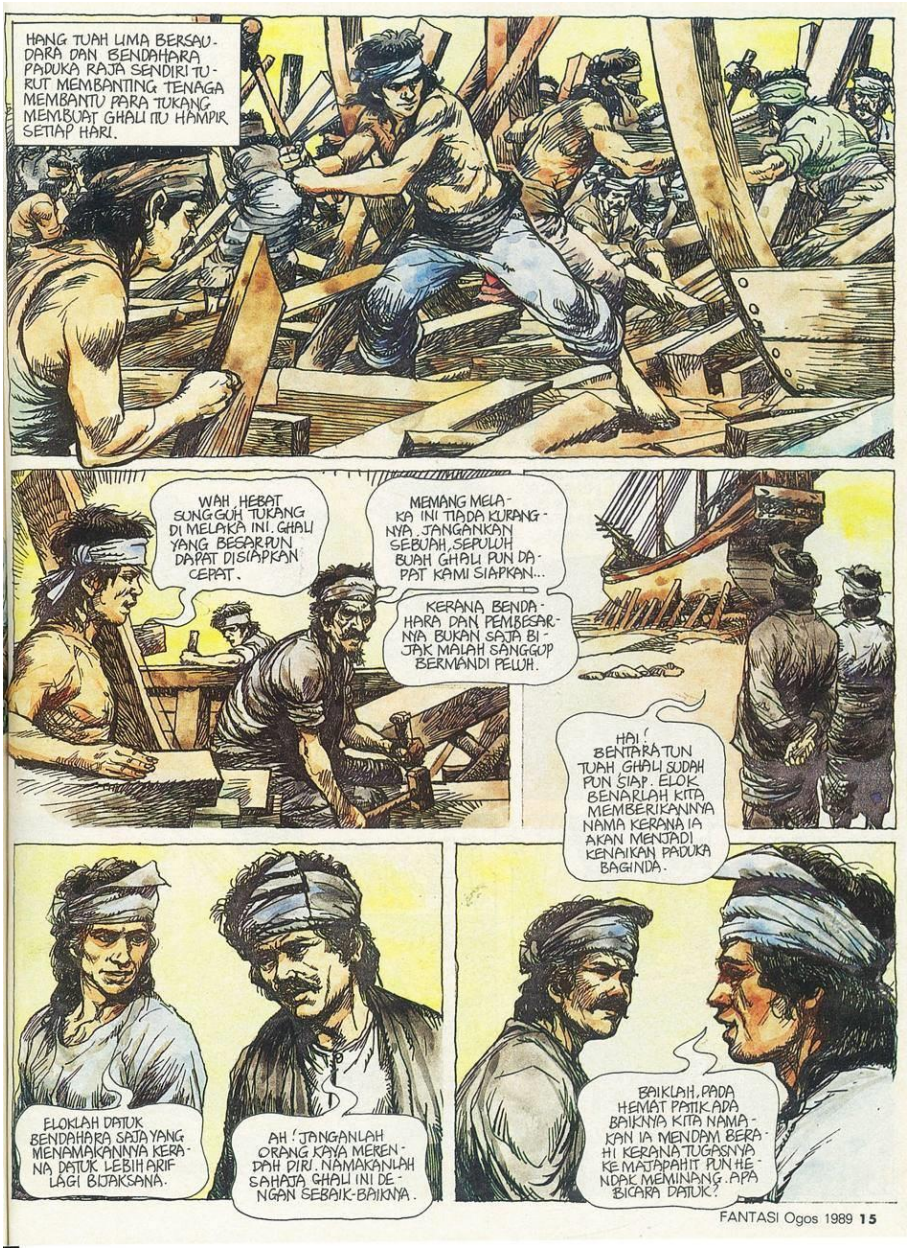



**Figure 8:** Jaafar Taib, Hang Tuah, Fantasi (August 1989), part 10, page 15. Hang Tuah and the Bendahara Paduka Raja help to build the ghali. Printed colour page, scanned by the first author. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

**A second episode.** The ghali episode gives a second matched comparison, between 1984 and 1988–1989. The captions again carry nearly the same sentence: Hang Tuah and the Bendahara Paduka Raja help the craftsmen build the ghali day after day. The 1984 version presents this in one wide, calm panel, with a firm but light line, natural anatomy, simple head cloths and open landscape (Figure 7). The Fantasi version spreads the same moment across a full page of seven panels. Bare-chested young men swing mallets on strong diagonals, dense hatching models their muscles, and Tuah wears the same headband with trailing ends, even when later addressed as Bentara Tun Tuah (Figure 8). The contrast between the 1984 naturalism and the 1988 adventure style therefore holds in a second episode, and in finished artwork.

**Colour in print.** Figure 8 also shows how colour works in the Fantasi serial. Thin washes of warm yellow, blue and brown are laid over the line. They add heat, light and atmosphere, and the blue headbands link the young men visually. The colour does not replace the high-contrast line, which still carries the structure of each figure. On this page, colour reinforces the energy of the adventure style rather than changing its meaning. This supports, though it cannot prove, the use of the black-and-white ink work for the 1988 Cintamani pages.

**Three styles, one hero**

Table 2 summarises the comparison.

**Table 2: Comparison of Jaafar Taib's three drawing styles**

| Category | 1977 (Medan Pelajar) | 1984 (Berita Harian Mingguan) | 1988 (Fantasi) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Line and rendering | Clean, even contour; bold solid blacks; stylised foliage | Loose fine-pen line; cross-hatching; visible pencil; light tone | Heavy blacks with feathering; strong contrast; dense texture |
| Face and physique | Children; round, smooth, iconic faces | Adolescents; individual, wary faces; natural proportions | Young men; angular, intense faces; muscular build |
| Costume and headgear | Peaked destar; buttoned baju; ornamented cuffs and sash | Loose head cloth; plain baju; crumpled sarong | Narrow headband; open baju, sleeves pushed up |
| Composition and panel design | Regular grid; frontal portrait; snake small; boxed captions | Tall vertical panel; nature dominant; distant silhouettes | Wide cinematic panels; depth and crowds; snake prominent; Datuk Bendahara enters |
| The snake's magic (Figures 4–6) | Stated only in the caption | Small sparkle strokes | Radiant light fills the panel |
| Boys and court (Figures 3–6) | Shared patterned headgear | Moderate contrast | Strong contrast |
| Dominant meaning (myth) | Model Malay pupil | Son of the kampung | Warrior in the making |

Four patterns emerge. First, the words stay almost the same while the images change. This supports Jakobson's (1959) view that intersemiotic translation is interpretation. In Hutcheon's (2006) terms, each version repeats the episode without replicating it.

Second, the headgear traces a shift in how Tuah's Malayness is coded. The peaked destar of 1977 symbolises propriety. The loose cloth of 1984 indexes rural labour. The headband of 1988 signals action. The hero remains recognisably Malay, but the source of that identity shifts from adab to the village to physical heroism.

Third, the snake grows in prominence, from a small detail in 1977, to a subtly visible coil in 1984, to a dramatic threat in 1988, and its magic becomes more visible on the second page. This mirrors a wider move from didactic to dramatic narration. Tuah also ages across the versions, from child to adolescent to young man. Each version places him at a different point on his path to becoming a hero.

Facial expression changes just as markedly. The 1977 faces are calm and composed, close to expressionless, in keeping with an ideal of restraint. In 1984, furrowed brows and a wary gaze give Tuah an inner life of caution and thought. In 1988, intense, determined expressions signal readiness for action. Expression thus moves from restraint, to inner feeling, to resolve, carrying the same shift from propriety to heroism.

Fourth, each style is consistent with its venue. The clarity of 1977 fits a student magazine, the naturalism of 1984 a general newspaper, and the drama of 1988 a commercial comic magazine during Malaysia's comics boom. These associations are plausible, but they are interpretations, not established explanations. No editorial records, reader data or statements from the editors were available to confirm them. Other factors may also have shaped the pages, including the artist's own development over eleven years, editorial requirements, page format and print technology. What the evidence does support is that Jaafar Taib's development is not a simple progression toward realism. Each version offers a different interpretation of the same hero.

These findings also matter for restoration. The boards preserve process evidence, such as paste-up lettering in 1977 and pencilled guides and underdrawing in 1984 and 1988. Knowing which marks belong to each style helps a restorer decide what to retain and what to clean.

## CONCLUSION

This study compared Jaafar Taib's three versions of Hang Tuah through two pages of one matched episode, checked against a second episode and a printed colour page. In answer to the first research question, it identified three distinct styles: decorative clarity in 1977, sketchy naturalism in 1984 and dramatic adventure realism in 1988. In answer to the second, each style constructs a different hero: the model Malay pupil, the son of the kampung, and the warrior in the making. In answer to the third, the hero's meaning shifted from propriety, to ordinariness, to heroic action, in ways consistent with, though not shown to be caused by, each version's venue and readership. Across all three, the hikayat's words stayed nearly constant while the drawing reinterpreted the hero.

The study makes three contributions. First, it positions the Malaysian illustrator as an interpreter of classical literature and brings drawing style into Hang Tuah adaptation scholarship, which has so far centred on film. Second, it offers a compact four-category frame for the semiotic comparison of drawing styles that can be applied to other heritage comics. Third, it supports heritage practice by documenting stylistic and process evidence that can guide the restoration and curation of Malaysian comic art.

The study is a focused interpretation of one episode, with two pages per version, checked against a second episode in two of the versions. It does not establish whether the identified styles hold across the whole of each version. It relies on the black-and-white ink work for the 1988 Cintamani pages, with only one printed colour page as a check, and exact issue numbers and dates could be traced for only that page. The links between style and readership are interpretive and await documentary support, and a systematic interview with the artist about these specific stylistic choices remains to be done. Future research could test the three styles across the full serials, especially the larger 1984 archive, examine more printed colour pages of the Fantasi version, search publishers' archives and library holdings for issue dates and editorial records, and interview Jaafar Taib about his choices.

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**Conflict of Interest**

The first author was commissioned by Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia (ITBM) to scan, restore and remaster Jaafar Taib's Hang Tuah artwork, and to create new illustrations for the remastered covers and interiors. This relationship did not influence the analysis. The authors declare no other conflict of interest.

**Data Availability Statement**

The primary sources are published comics and original artwork. Page images are subject to copyright and cannot be shared openly. The corresponding author can provide the coding log upon reasonable request.

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