

# Study on the Image of Zhuge Liang in Ming Dynasty Opera Adaptations of the Three Kingdoms

Ren Jie

Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Sungai Long, Malaysia

Zhuge Liang was an eminent and universally known historical figure whose name is familiar to almost every household. He possessed exceptional talents in many areas and made significant contributions, particularly in politics, military affairs, and diplomacy. In historical records, Zhuge Liang was regarded as a statesman skilled in military administration rather than unconventional stratagems, and more proficient in civil governance than in battlefield command—an internal affairs expert described as “strong in pacifying the state and managing the army, but less given to extraordinary schemes, and better at governing the people than leading troops”. Among the general public, however, his image transformed into an almost deified and omniscient figure, one who could “make impeccable plans and even summon the wind and rain”. This contrast reflects the significant evolution of Zhuge Liang’s image. This dissertation focuses on the image of Zhuge Liang as portrayed in Ming Dynasty Three Kingdoms operas, analyzes the reasons for the transformation of his image, and attempts to offer modest supplementary insights based on previous research.

**Keywords:** Ming Dynasty, Three Kingdoms opera, Zhuge Liang, image of Zhuge Liang

## Introduction

From 184 CE to 280 CE, China experienced the transition from the late Eastern Han Dynasty to the Three Kingdoms Period. This nearly one-hundred-year span is regarded as one of the most brilliant eras in Chinese history, distinguished by the emergence of numerous heroic and extraordinary figures. Among them, Zhuge Liang has been the most admired and widely followed by the public.

The earliest historical portrayal of Zhuge Liang is found in the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi*), written by Chen Shou. As this work was compiled during the Western Jin Dynasty, Chen Shou was constrained by the political context of his time and therefore employed many evasive and ambiguous expressions, refraining from fully restoring the historical reality. It was not until the Southern Dynasties Period, when Pei Songzhi, acting under the orders of Emperor Wen of the Liu Song Dynasty, gathered a large amount of historical material to annotate the *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, that the deficiencies caused by its incomplete documentation were effectively supplemented.

After the Jin Dynasty, the image of Zhuge Liang gradually became deified. This process was especially intensified through the embellishment of storytelling traditions and theatrical performances during the Sui and Tang Periods, which made his character more vivid but increasingly detached from his historical reality. By the late Yuan and early Ming Dynasties, Luo Guanzhong, drawing together historical records and popular anecdotes,

created *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one of China's Four Great Classical Novels. From this point on, Zhuge Liang truly ascended to a mythic status, portrayed as a near-divine figure capable of unfailing calculation and even commanding the forces of nature. Lu Xun famously remarked: "*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* depicts Zhuge Liang as extraordinarily wise, yet bordering on the supernatural".

Since the Sui and Tang Dynasties, numerous folk operas and theatrical performances about the Three Kingdoms have circulated among the people. During the Southern Song Dynasty, having just endured the humiliation of the Jingkang Incident, both the court and the populace were eager to see the reunification of the realm. As a result, Zhuge Liang's Northern Expeditions were highly admired, giving rise to a political and cultural tendency of "honoring Liu and disparaging Cao". At that time, people would rejoice upon hearing of Cao Cao's defeats, yet weep upon hearing of Liu Bei's setbacks, and popular veneration of Zhuge Liang continued to grow unabated.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the number of operas related to the Three Kingdoms increased dramatically. Coupled with the appearance of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, popular enthusiasm for the Three Kingdoms reached an unprecedented height. This paper mainly discusses the image of Zhuge Liang as reflected in Three Kingdoms operas of the Ming Dynasty. By employing content analysis to examine the differing portrayals of Zhuge Liang across various operas, it seeks—on the basis of previous scholarship—to correct biases and supplement existing interpretations, thereby providing a reference for future research.

### The Image of Zhuge Liang in Ming-Dynasty Chuanqi Drama

#### "The Record of the Thatched Cottage"

"The Record of the Thatched Cottage" (full title: The Record of Liu Xuande's Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage) was written by an anonymous author in the late Yuan and early Ming Period and is recorded in *Yuan Shantang Qu Pin*. The play recounts a series of stories centered on Liu Bei's three visits to the thatched cottage and Zhuge Liang's decision to emerge from seclusion to assist Liu Bei.

"The Record of the Thatched Cottage" consists of 54 acts. Acts one through 11 depict in detail the entire process of Liu Bei's "three visits to the thatched cottage" to invite Zhuge Liang to enter public service. Liu Bei, accompanied by Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, travels to Longzhong to seek Zhuge Liang's assistance. Anticipating Liu Bei's arrival, Zhuge Liang instructs his disciple on two consecutive occasions to turn Liu Bei away, claiming that he is not at home. During Liu Bei's second visit, although he does manage to meet Zhuge Liang, Zhuge Liang feigns illness and firmly refuses to leave his seclusion. Undeterred, Liu Bei pays a third visit to Longzhong. Moved by Liu Bei's sincerity, Zhuge Liang analyzes the prevailing political situation for him and ultimately decides to emerge from seclusion to serve and assist Liu Bei.

Acts 12 through 16 of "The Record of the Thatched Cottage" recount the Battle of Bowang Slope. After Zhuge Liang emerges from seclusion, Cao Cao orders Xiahou Dun to lead an army of one hundred thousand to attack Liu Bei. Holding the sword and seal of command, Zhuge Liang directs the deployment of the troops. Zhang Fei refuses to submit to Zhuge Liang's authority, repeatedly challenges him, and even wagers his life against Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Liang's calculations prove unfailing, and Xiahou Dun suffers a crushing defeat, with only a few hundred cavalry escaping from the original force of one hundred thousand.

Because Zhang Fei fails to capture Xiahou Dun alive, Zhuge Liang initially intends to have him executed. However, in consideration of the pleas made by Liu Bei and the other generals, Zhuge Liang grants Zhang Fei a

pardon. From that point on, Zhang Fei holds Zhuge Liang in deep admiration. The play ingeniously shifts the character who wagers with Zhuge Liang from Guan Yu, as portrayed in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, to Zhang Fei. This change better accords with Zhang Fei's fiery temperament and is also more consistent with common sense.

Acts 17 through 20 describe the Battle of Xinye. After Xiahou Dun's devastating defeat at Bowang Slope, Cao Cao dispatches Cao Ren, Li Dian, and Xu Chu to lead an army of four hundred thousand against Xinye, only to be soundly defeated by Zhuge Liang's stratagems.

Acts 21 through 24 of the play recount the Battle of Changban Slope. Cao Cao dispatches Xu Shu to persuade Liu Bei to surrender, in an effort to demonstrate his benevolence toward the people. He then divides his main forces into eight columns, vowing to crush Fan City. Unwilling to abandon the common people, Liu Bei retreats while escorting the populace across the river, intending to withdraw to Jiangling. Guan Yu and Zhuge Liang are sent separately to Jiangxia to request military assistance from Liu Qi.

When Liu Bei reaches Changban Slope, he is overtaken by the Cao army's elite cavalry and suffers a devastating defeat, becoming separated from his troops. Lady Gan throws herself into a well and dies, Lady Mi takes her own life by piercing her throat with a golden hairpin, and only through the protection of the great general Zhao Yun does the infant Liu Shan (A-dou) narrowly escape death. Unlike *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the play has Zhuge Liang instruct Zhang Fei before his departure to hold the bridge at the river crossing and intimidate the pursuing Cao forces, thereby highlighting Zhuge Liang's extraordinary foresight and strategic brilliance.

Acts 25 through 28 depict Zhuge Liang's journey to Eastern Wu and the famous episode of "debating the scholars". In order to facilitate the Sun-Liu alliance, Zhuge Liang travels to Jiangdong together with Lu Su. Confronted by the challenges and interrogations of the assembled elites of Jiangdong, Zhuge Liang responds with remarkable agility and eloquence, leaving the ministers of Eastern Wu speechless.

Acts 29 through 31 of the play recount the stories of "Jiang Gan Stealing the Letters" and "Pang Tong Offering a Strategy". Jiang Gan, sent by Cao Cao to Eastern Wu to persuade Zhou Yu to surrender, fails in his mission and instead falls into Zhou Yu's trap, causing Cao Cao to mistakenly execute the naval commanders Cai Mao and Zhang Yun—an event that lays the groundwork for Cao Cao's eventual defeat at Red Cliffs. On his way back from Jiangdong, Jiang Gan encounters the brilliant strategist Pang Tong and introduces him to Cao Cao. Pang Tong then proposes the plan of chained warships to Cao Cao but later manages to escape back to Jiangdong. The play condenses Jiang Gan's two journeys to Jiangdong into a single episode, highlighting Zhou Yu's extraordinary intelligence and cunning.

Acts 32 through 34 depict the stories of the "Borrowing Arrows With Straw Boats" and the "Feigning Injury Strategy". After learning that Zhou Yu's scheme led to the deaths of Cai Mao and Zhang Yun, Zhuge Liang is recognized by Zhou Yu as a rival of remarkable talent. Zhou Yu then orders Zhuge Liang to produce more than one hundred thousand arrows within 10 days, hoping to use this task as an opportunity to eliminate him. Displaying his unmatched ingenuity, Zhuge Liang takes advantage of the heavy fog on the river to "borrow" over one hundred thousand arrows from Cao Cao. Meanwhile, Cao Cao sends Cai Zhong and Cai He to feign surrender. Zhou Yu cleverly turns this to his advantage, coordinating with Huang Gai to execute the "Feigning Injury Strategy", in which Huang Gai is beaten to lend credibility to the ruse, while Kan Ze is sent to Cao Cao's camp to deliver a forged surrender letter.

Acts 35 through 39 of the play recount the story of “Borrowing the East Wind”. During the depths of winter, Zhou Yu falls ill due to the absence of a southeast wind. Zhuge Liang volunteers to “borrow the wind” and successfully summons three days of strong southeast winds. Fearing Zhuge Liang’s seemingly supernatural ability to “control heaven and earth”, Zhou Yu orders Ding Feng and Xu Sheng to execute him once the borrowed wind has ended. However, Zhuge Liang, having anticipated this, arranges for Zhao Yun to be waiting in advance, and he returns safely to Jiangling together with Zhao Yun. Zhou Yu also considers joining forces with Cao Cao to capture Liu Bei but is dissuaded by Lu Su—this portrayal further emphasizes Zhou Yu’s narrow-mindedness.

Acts 40 through 43 depict the Battle of Red Cliffs. Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu each deploy their troops and direct strategies. Huang Gai feigns surrender and sets fire to Cao Cao’s fleet, resulting in a crushing defeat in which only 18 cavalries escape. As Zhuge Liang has predicted, Guan Yu, remembering Cao Cao’s past kindness, spares him. Zhuge Liang initially intends to execute Guan Yu, but at the intercession of Liu Bei and the other generals, he ultimately pardons him.

Acts 44 through 46 of the play recount the story of Zhou Yu’s plot to assassinate Liu Bei at Yellow Crane Tower. Zhou Yu sends Lu Su as an envoy, ostensibly to persuade Liu Bei to become an Eastern Wu son-in-law and jointly resist Cao Cao, but in reality, he intends to lure Liu Bei to Yellow Crane Tower to kill him. Having anticipated Zhou Yu’s scheme, Zhuge Liang arranges for Sun Qian to disguise himself as a fisherman to rescue Liu Bei. Sun Qian seizes the opportunity to help Liu Bei escape. When Zhou Yu pursues, Zhuge Liang has already ordered Zhang Fei to intercept, ensuring Liu Bei’s safe retreat. This episode does not appear in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and it further emphasizes Zhuge Liang’s extraordinary foresight and strategic brilliance.

Acts 47 through 49 depict the “Beauty Trap” (Meiren Ji) story. Zhou Yu attempts to reclaim Jingzhou using a scheme involving a beautiful woman. Zhuge Liang, however, gives Zhao Yun three secret instructions (silk bags), turning the scheme back on Zhou Yu. The plan backfires on Zhou Yu, who “loses both his lady and his troops”, while Liu Bei safely retreats to Jingzhou.

Acts 50 through 52 tell the story of the conquest of Yizhou. After Zhou Yu dies from anger and frustration, Zhuge Liang sends Zhao Yun to persuade Ma Chao to surrender. With Ma Chao’s capitulation, Liu Bei successfully occupies Yizhou.

Acts 53 through 54 recount the story of Liu Bei proclaiming himself emperor in Western Shu. After occupying Yizhou, Zhuge Liang and the court ministers advise Liu Bei to ascend the throne. Liu Bei initially declines several times and sends Zhou Cang to escort Zhuge Liang’s wife to Yizhou. Upon proclaiming himself emperor, Liu Bei enfeoffs Zhuge Liang as Marquis of Wuxiang and appoints him Left Prime Minister, in recognition of Zhuge Liang’s contributions to the state.

*The Record of the Thatched Cottage* spans from the “Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage” to “Liu Bei Proclaims Himself Emperor in Western Shu”. Li Qingxi observes:

*The Record of the Thatched Cottage* selects a substantial segment of Three Kingdoms history, which is completely different from focusing on a single story. It adopts a narrative structure of introduction, development, turn, and conclusion, transforming the storytelling method of earlier zaju dramas. The play presents Zhuge Liang as a figure of extraordinary foresight and strategic brilliance, capable of predicting events with uncanny accuracy, commanding the elements, possessing far-sighted vision, exceptional talent, lofty ambition, broad-mindedness, unwavering loyalty, a hermit-like demeanor, and remarkable eloquence. (2020, p. 81)

### “The Record of Eastern Wu”

“The Record of Eastern Wu”, also known as “The Record of the Brocade Bag”, was written by an

anonymous author during the Ming Dynasty. It mainly recounts the story of Zhou Yu's use of the "Beauty Trap" to reclaim Jingzhou.

The first act of "The Record of Eastern Wu" is titled "Celebrating Longevity" (*Shang Shou*), which depicts Sun Quan hosting a lavish banquet to celebrate the birthday of his mother, Empress Dowager Wu. Empress Wu, concerned that the powerful forces of Liu Bei and Cao Cao might threaten Eastern Wu, expresses her worries. Sun Quan, however, believes that Eastern Wu is secure and prosperous, protected by the natural defenses of the Yangtze River, and that even if Liu Bei and Cao Cao command armies numbering in the hundreds of thousands, they pose no real threat.

The second act of "The Record of Eastern Wu", titled "Drawing Lots" (*Nian Jiu*), recounts how Liu Bei, acting on Zhuge Liang's advice, prepares to seize the four southern commanderies of Jingzhou, while Zhou Yu sets in motion the "Beauty Trap", feigning the marriage of the Marquis of Wu's younger sister to Liu Bei in order to demand the return of Jingzhou.

The third act, "Proposing the Marriage" (*Shuo Qin*), tells how Liu Bei successfully captures the four southern commanderies of Jingzhou. Lü Fan of Eastern Wu is then sent to propose the marriage. Zhuge Liang gives Zhao Yun three brocade bags (secret instructions), ordering him to protect Liu Bei on his journey to Jiangdong.

The fourth act, "Paying Respects to Qiao" (*Ye Qiao*), describes Liu Bei's arrival in Jiangdong and his visit to Qiao Guolao. Realizing that this is part of Zhou Yu's scheme, Qiao Guolao decides to inform Empress Dowager Wu of the plot.

The fifth act, "Arranging the Marriage" (*Zhao Qin*), depicts the meeting between Empress Dowager Wu and Liu Bei at Ganlu Temple. Qiao Guolao strongly urges Empress Dowager Wu to consent to the marriage between Liu Bei and the Marquis of Wu's sister so as not to break faith with others. Empress Dowager Wu ultimately agrees to the union.

The sixth act of "The Record of Eastern Wu", titled "Urging the Return" (*Cui Gui*), recounts how Liu Bei, using the pretext of leaving the city to offer ancestral sacrifices, escapes from Jiangdong with Lady Sun. At the city gate, they are intercepted by Pan Zhang and Chen Wu, generals under Zhou Yu. Intimidated by Lady Sun's status as a princess of Eastern Wu, the two generals dare not forcibly stop them and are compelled to let Liu Bei and his party depart.

The seventh act, "Pursuit" (*Zhui Gan*), tells how Pan Zhang and Chen Wu, acting on Zhou Yu's orders, again pursue Liu Bei, only to be frightened off once more.

The eighth act, "The Second Fit of Rage" (*Er Qi*), depicts Zhou Yu personally leading troops in pursuit of Liu Bei. However, Zhuge Liang has already arranged for Zhang Fei, Huang Zhong, and Wei Yan to provide support in advance, resulting in Zhou Yu's crushing defeat. This play vividly presents Zhuge Liang as a figure of extraordinary foresight, uncanny prescience, and exceptional ability.

### **"The Record of the Seven Victories"**

"The Record of the Seven Victories" was written by an anonymous author of the Ming Dynasty and is recorded in *Yuan Shantang Qu Pin* and *Quhai Zongmu Tiyao*. The play was originally titled "The Record of Marquis Wu's Seven Victories" and was collated by the Qinhuai literatus. The drama consists of 36 acts and primarily recounts the story of Zhuge Liang's seven captures of Meng Huo.

Acts one through six of "The Record of the Seven Victories" tell the story of Zhuge Liang "Pacifying the Five Routes While Seated at Ease". After Liu Bei's death, Cao Pi, following Sima Yi's advice, dispatches five

separate armies to attack Shu Han. Zhuge Liang, remaining calmly at his seat, effortlessly repels four of these forces. He also sends Deng Zhi as an envoy to Eastern Wu, successfully persuading Sun Quan to sever ties with Wei and ally with Shu, thereby consolidating the Sun-Liu alliance and thwarting Cao Wei's plan to invade Shu Han with five armies.

Act seven depicts the episode "Meng Huo Goes Hunting", while act eight recounts the story of "Qin Mi Debates Heaven". After Sun Quan agrees to form an alliance with Shu Han, he sends Zhang Wen as an envoy to Shu to return diplomatic courtesies. Zhang Wen engages Qin Mi in an impressive debate based on the *Heavenly Questions* (*Tianwen*), and Qin Mi's quick wit and adaptability leave Zhang Wen thoroughly impressed.

Acts nine through 10 of "The Record of the Seven Victories" recount the story of the "First Capture of Meng Huo". Wei Yan and Zhao Yun raid the enemy camp and capture Meng Huo alive. Unwilling to submit in his heart, Meng Huo is released by Zhuge Liang, who adopts a policy of "attacking the heart" rather than relying solely on force. Zhuge Liang even invites Meng Huo to view the lanterns. Wang Zhiqiang observes:

Zhuge Liang's choice of the strategy of winning hearts reflects both a historically informed reflection and a decision shaped by practical realities. The Shu Han regime consciously distinguished itself from the benighted and chaotic rule of Emperors Huan and Ling, strongly criticizing indiscriminate military conquest. At the same time, it emulated the governance of Emperors Wen and Jing and that of Emperor Guangwu, reviving the Han Dynasty's policy of winning over distant peoples through virtue during its prosperous periods. (2023, p. 56)

Acts 11 through 13 describe the "Second Capture of Meng Huo". Two of Meng Huo's subordinate generals, moved by Zhuge Liang's mercy in sparing their lives, seize Meng Huo and his wife and present them to the Shu army. Meng Huo, however, remains unconvinced and refuses to submit, and Zhuge Liang once again releases him. Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang's two wives, who are in Chengdu, worry deeply about his safety during the southern campaign and therefore seek out a diviner to predict when Zhuge Liang will return to court.

Act 14 recounts the story of the "Third Capture of Meng Huo". Meng Huo sends his younger brother Meng You to feign surrender, plotting a coordinated attack from within and without. Zhuge Liang sees through the ruse, captures Meng Huo, Meng You, and their followers alive, yet, as Meng Huo still refuses to submit, Zhuge Liang releases him once again.

Acts 15 through 16 of "The Record of the Seven Victories" recount the story of the "Fourth Capture of Meng Huo". Zhuge Liang lays another stratagem and once again captures Meng Huo alive. Meng Huo begs Zhuge Liang to spare him yet again, and Zhuge Liang releases him once more.

Act 17 describes how Zhuge Liang's wife, Lady Huang, worries that his southern campaign may not be going smoothly. Based on one of Zhuge Liang's inventions, she draws an image of a lion and has it delivered to Zhuge Liang.

Acts 18 through 20 tell the story of "Meng Huo Borrowing Troops". In order to resist the Shu forces, Meng Huo travels to the state of Dosi to borrow troops. The King of Dosi believes that poisonous springs lie in all four directions and plans to destroy the Shu army without deploying a single soldier by poisoning them. After the Shu troops drink from the springs, they indeed fall ill. To save the three armies, Zhuge Liang sincerely prays for pure water, and Heaven, moved by his sincerity, causes fresh springs to appear. After drinking the water, the Shu soldiers are completely cured of the poison.

Acts 21 through 22 recount the story of the "Fifth Capture of Meng Huo". After taking refuge with the King of Dosi and avoiding direct engagement with the Shu army, Meng Huo is betrayed when Yang Feng of Hai Commandery—who had once benefited from the grace of the Han dynasty—secretly infiltrates the state, captures

both Meng Huo and the King of Dosi, and presents them to Zhuge Liang. Meng Huo still refuses to submit, and Zhuge Liang releases both Meng Huo and the King of Dosi together. Zhuge Liang also rewards Yang Feng with ten taels of silver and two bolts of Shu brocade.

Acts 23 through 30 of “The Record of the Seven Victories” recount the story of the “Sixth Capture of Meng Huo”. When Meng Huo leads his troops into battle against the Shu army, Shu generals Zhang Yí and Zhang Yì are defeated and taken captive, but are fortunately rescued by the great generals Zhao Yun and Wei Yan. Meng Huo then seeks assistance from King Mulu. King Mulu’s beast troops are defeated by Zhuge Liang’s newly invented “Lion Formation”, and King Mulu himself is killed amid the chaos of battle. After King Mulu’s death, Meng Huo resorts to a feigned surrender, ordering his tribesmen to bind him and pretend to submit to the Shu army. This ruse is detected by Zhuge Liang, and Meng Huo is captured for the sixth time. Zhuge Liang once again releases Meng Huo and his followers.

Acts 31 through 34 recount the story of the “Seventh Capture of Meng Huo”. Meng Huo gathers his remaining forces and seeks refuge in the state of Wuge, requesting assistance from its king. The rattan-armored troops of Wuge are impervious to blades and spears, but Zhuge Liang employs fire weapons to defeat them decisively, inflicting massive casualties. Meng Huo is captured yet again and finally submits wholeheartedly, declaring: “The Chancellor’s might is heaven-sent; the southern tribes will rebel no more”. From that point onward, Meng Huo sincerely pledges allegiance to the Shu Han regime.

Acts 35 through 36 of “The Record of the Seven Victories” recount the story of “Pacifying the South and Returning in Triumph”. After quelling the rebellion in Nanzhong, Zhuge Liang leads his army back to the capital. On the return journey, the army encounters vengeful spirits haunting a river. Unable to bear the wrongful suffering of these souls, Zhuge Liang sincerely recites ritual prayers and offers sacrifices to appease them. As a result, thousands of spirits drift away along the Han River, and the Shu Han army is able to cross the river safely. Moved by Zhuge Liang’s mercy in sparing his life, Meng Huo presents plow oxen and warhorses, as well as gold, pearls, precious goods, cinnabar lacquer, and medicinal materials, to reward the Shu army under the chancellor’s command. Meng Huo and the other southern tribes also establish a living shrine in honor of Zhuge Liang, naming it “The Benevolent Father”, where they burn incense and offer worship morning and evening.

Unlike the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the chuanqi drama “The Record of the Seven Victories” adds numerous episodes depicting Zhuge Liang’s wife worrying about her husband, thereby highlighting the virtue and devotion of Lady Zhuge. “The Record of the Seven Victories” presents Zhuge Liang as a figure of unwavering loyalty, extraordinary strategic brilliance, uncanny foresight, mastery of the policy of winning hearts, benevolence and compassion, diligence in governance and care for the people, exceptional talent, inventive creativity, and deep marital affection.

### “Borrowing the East Wind”

“Borrowing the East Wind” was written by Ma Jiren during the Ming Dynasty. Ma Jiren, styled Jifu, also known as Gengsheng, with the sobriquet Feitang and the alternative pen name *Xiefang Zhuren*, was a native of Wu County in Jiangsu and lived around the ninth year of the Chongzhen reign of the Ming Dynasty. The play recounts the story of Zhuge Liang “borrowing the east wind” prior to the Battle of Red Cliffs.

Wu Jinshan observes:

The so-called “borrowing” of the east wind is merely a literary expression—a rhetorical device employed by writers to vividly portray Zhuge Liang’s mastery of astronomy and geography, as well as his civil and military talents. The east wind

that appeared during the Battle of Red Cliffs was simply a natural phenomenon, and Zhuge Liang, drawing on his accumulated knowledge, calculated in advance the timing of its arrival. (1995, p. 48)

“Borrowing the East Wind” presents Zhuge Liang as a figure of extraordinary strategic brilliance, seemingly capable of summoning wind and weather.

### “The Record of Red Cliffs”

“The Record of Red Cliffs” was written by an anonymous author of the Ming Dynasty and is recorded in *Quhai Zongmu Tiyo*. The play recounts the story in which Zhuge Liang dispatches Guan Yu to block Cao Cao at Huarong Trail, and Guan Yu, mindful of past favors, ultimately spares Cao Cao.

Zou Tanghua notes: “By assigning Guan Yu to guard Huarong Trail, Zhuge Liang exerted his authority and intimidated the entire army, thereby establishing his prestige among the troops” (2010, p. 77). “The Record of Red Cliffs” portrays Zhuge Liang as a figure of exceptional talent, a master of strategy with foresight, a ruler who governs according to law, and one whose brilliance and prudence command respect.

### “The Record of Promoting Liu”

“The Record of Promoting Liu” preserves only a fragment titled “Marquis Wu Pacifies the South”. Written by an anonymous author of the Ming Dynasty, the play has not been otherwise recorded. It is included in Volume Six of *Daming Tianxia Chun* under *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, following *Guan Yunchang Advises His Son*. The surviving fragment recounts the events before Zhuge Liang’s southern campaign, in which the civil and military officials of the court offer him advice. During a banquet, Jiang Wan, Fei Yi, Ma Su, and Qin Mi each present Zhuge Liang with different strategies for the southern expedition, all of which he receives with humility.

Fu Fangfang comments:

Zhuge Liang carefully examined both internal and external situations, viewing problems with a perspective of connected development. He integrated the principles of timing, geography, and human relations into both military operations and governance, applying the right measures at the right place and time, and appointing the right people for the right tasks in pacifying and developing the south. His strategic vision of “winning hearts,” his principle of selecting talents based on sincerity, and his concepts of harmony in governance and ethnic relations remain highly relevant today. (2016, p. 200)

“The Record of Promoting Liu” presents Zhuge Liang as loyal and steadfast, exceptionally talented, humble, and cautious, with a broad vision for the realm, diligent in governance, compassionate toward the people, and skilled in employing capable subordinates.

Among Ming-Dynasty chuanqi dramas depicting Zhuge Liang, six are known, though the contents of “Borrowing the East Wind” and “The Record of Red Cliffs” are lost, and only the fragment “Marquis Wu Pacifies the South” survives from “The Record of Promoting Liu”. These six plays collectively highlight Zhuge Liang’s extraordinary strategic brilliance, uncanny foresight, apparent command over natural forces, exceptional talent, far-sighted vision, diligence in governance, care for the people, and lofty ambition.

## The Image of Zhuge Liang in Ming-Dynasty Zaju Drama

### “Celebrating the Winter Solstice With a Shared Banquet of Peace”

“Celebrating the Winter Solstice With a Shared Banquet of Peace” was written by an anonymous author of the Ming Dynasty. The play recounts how, after Liu Bei, with the assistance of Zhuge Liang and others, became the sole ruler of Western Shu, the country enjoyed peace and prosperity. During the Winter Solstice festival, Liu Bei hosts a grand banquet to honor his meritorious officials. He sends Zhang Fei and Ma Chao to Jingzhou to

invite Guan Yu to the feast. On their way, they decisively defeat Zhou Yu's forces and return to join the celebration, sharing the festive occasion and inspiring the troops to contribute to the achievements of Shu Han.

“Celebrating the Winter Solstice With a Shared Banquet of Peace” consists of four acts. The first act depicts how, after Liu Bei occupies Western Shu, the country prospers and the people live in peace. Liu Bei consults with Zhuge Liang to host a celebratory banquet during the Winter Solstice festival—both to mark the occasion and to reward meritorious officials. Zhuge Liang summons the generals, including Huang Zhong, Zhao Yun, Zhang Fei, Ma Chao, Jian Yong, Gong Gu, Mi Zhu, Mi Fang, and Jiang Wei, who arrive early. Zhuge Liang assigns each of them specific tasks and sends Zhang Fei to Jingzhou to invite Guan Yu to Western Shu for the celebration.

The second act recounts Zhang Fei and Ma Chao's journey to Jingzhou to invite Guan Yu. Guan Yu leaves Guan Ping and Guan Xing to guard Jingzhou and takes five hundred elite troops led by Zhou Cang with him to attend the feast. Hearing that Guan Yu is leaving Jingzhou, Zhou Yu plans to intercept and kill him midway in an attempt to reclaim Jingzhou. The third act tells how Zhou Yu leads his army to ambush Guan Yu, only to suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of Guan Yu and Zhang Fei.

The fourth act depicts Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Ma Chao arriving in Western Shu to attend the banquet, celebrating the festival together with Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang, and the other generals. After the feast, Guan Yu returns to Jingzhou to continue defending it. “Celebrating the Winter Solstice With a Shared Banquet of Peace” portrays Zhuge Liang as exceptionally talented, skilled in governance, and possessing far-sighted vision.

### “Zhuge Pacifies Shu”

“Zhuge Pacifies Shu” was written by Qiu Rucheng of the Ming Dynasty, and only the first act survives. Qiu Rucheng, a native of the Xuande period, also wrote “Preface to the Zaju Drama Jiaohong Ji”, and this play recounts Zhuge Liang's campaign to pacify the south.

You Xiangyu and Xu Xinggui observe:

The Southern Campaign raised the morale of the Shu Han army, strengthened the Shu court's control over surrounding ethnic minority regions, and consolidated Shu Han's rule in Nanzhong. It effectively secured the rear of Shu Han, eliminating potential concerns for future northern expeditions. Moreover, the abundant natural resources and increasingly developed productivity of the southern regions were essential for the growth and consolidation of the Shu Han regime. (2014, p. 82)

The play presents Zhuge Liang as far-sighted, exceptionally talented, skilled in the policy of winning hearts, diligent in governance, and caring toward the people.

### “The Thatched Cottage”

“The Thatched Cottage” was written by an anonymous author of the Ming Dynasty and is recorded in *Jinle Kaozheng*. The play recounts the story of Liu Bei's “Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage”.

Ju Nan observes: “On a deeper level, the political alliance formed between Liu Bei's faction and the ‘outsider’ gentry of Jingzhou through the ‘Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage’ laid the foundational basis for the establishment of the Shu Han state” (2023, p. 51). The play portrays Zhuge Liang as exceptionally talented, ambitious, possessing a broad vision for the realm, and embodying the demeanor of a reclusive scholar.

### “Yellow Crane Tower”

“Yellow Crane Tower” was written by an anonymous author of the Ming Dynasty. The play may share the same subject matter as Yuan-Dynasty Zhu Kai's *Liu Bei Drunkenly Flees Yellow Crane Tower*, though the

historical accuracy of the story is uncertain. *Liu Bei Drunkenly Flees Yellow Crane Tower* tells how, after the Battle of Red Cliffs, Zhou Yu, taking advantage of the absence of Zhuge Liang, Zhang Fei, Guan Yu, and others, invites Liu Bei to a banquet at Yellow Crane Tower with the secret intention of detaining and killing him. In this critical situation, Zhuge Liang employs extraordinary intelligence to thwart Zhou Yu's plot, allowing Liu Bei to return safely to camp.

Chen Qian notes:

The play demonstrates Liu Bei's excessive dependence on Zhuge Liang. Once Liu Bei loses the guidance of his military strategist, he becomes indecisive and hesitant, and even loses the ability to discern right from wrong and to assess the situation accurately. The work vividly portrays Liu Bei's confusion and lack of initiative. (2010, p. 71)

“Yellow Crane Tower” presents Zhuge Liang as extraordinarily intelligent, possessing uncanny foresight, unwaveringly loyal, and exceptionally talented.

### “Subduing Zhang Fei With Wit”

“Subduing Zhang Fei With Wit” was written by an anonymous author of the Ming Dynasty. The story originates from *Pinghua of the Records of the Three Kingdoms* and also appears in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The *Baowen Tang Bibliography* records works titled *Qi Zhang Fei* and *Three Times Subduing Zhang Fei*, which may be related to this play. The drama portrays Zhuge Liang as exceptionally eloquent, intelligent, and wise.

Among Ming-Dynasty zaju dramas depicting Zhuge Liang, five are known. The contents of “The Thatched Cottage”, “Yellow Crane Tower”, and “Subduing Zhang Fei With Wit” are lost, and only the first act of “Zhuge Pacifies Shu” survives. Collectively, these five plays primarily highlight Zhuge Liang's extraordinary strategic brilliance, uncanny foresight, exceptional talent, broad vision for the realm, far-sightedness, and unwavering loyalty.

### Conclusion

Zhuge Liang was a renowned statesman, military strategist, and tactician in history. Throughout his life, he served two emperors with utmost dedication, exhausting himself in service until his death, making him a timeless model of loyalty. After the Jin Dynasty, Zhuge Liang's image gradually became deified. From the Sui and Tang Dynasties through the Ming and Qing Periods, numerous folk operas about the Three Kingdoms emerged. In these operas, Zhuge Liang was undoubtedly the most prominently featured figure. The author has compiled a statistical table of Zhuge Liang's portrayals in Ming-Dynasty dramas, as shown below:

Table 1

*Statistical Summary of Zhuge Liang's Portrayals in Ming-Dynasty Dramas*

No.	Drama	Author	Survival status	Story summary	Portrayal of Zhuge Liang
	“Ming-Dynasty Chuanqi Drama”				
1	“The Record of the Thatched Cottage”	Anonymous	Complete	Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage; Battle of Bowang; Battle of Xinye; Battle of Changban; Debate With Scholars; Jiang Gan Steals Letters; Pang Tong Offers a Plan; Borrowing Arrows With Straw Boats; Stratagem of Self-Injury; Borrowing the East Wind; Burning Red Cliffs; Yellow Crane Tower; Beauty Trap; Conquest of Yi Province; Liu Bei Declares Himself Emperor in Western Shu.	Extraordinary strategic brilliance, uncanny foresight, command over wind and weather, far-sighted vision, exceptional talent, lofty ambition, broad vision for the realm, unwavering loyalty, reclusive scholar style, exceptional eloquence.

Table 1 to be continued

2	“The Record of Eastern Wu”	Anonymous	Complete	Zhou Yu’s “Beauty Trap” is thwarted by Zhuge Liang; Zhou Yu suffers a crushing defeat.	Extraordinary strategic brilliance, uncanny foresight, exceptional talent. Unwavering loyalty, extraordinary strategic brilliance, uncanny foresight, policy of winning hearts, benevolence, diligent governance, exceptional talent, inventive creativity, deep marital affection.
3	“The Record of the Seven Victories”	Anonymous	Complete	Pacifying the Five Routes; Seven Captures of Meng Huo; Returning Triumphant from the South.	Extraordinary strategic brilliance, uncanny foresight, policy of winning hearts, benevolence, diligent governance, exceptional talent, inventive creativity, deep marital affection.
4	“Borrowing the East Wind”	Ma Jiren	Lost	Zhuge Liang borrows the east wind.	Extraordinary strategic brilliance, command over wind and weather.
5	“The Record of Red Cliffs”	Anonymous	Lost	Zhuge Liang sends Guan Yu to block Cao Cao at Huarong Trail; Guan Yu spares Cao Cao out of gratitude.	Exceptional talent, rule by law, uncanny foresight, extraordinary strategic brilliance, far-sighted vision. Unwavering loyalty, exceptional talent, humble and cautious, broad vision for the realm, diligent governance and care for the people, skilled in employing capable subordinates.
6	“The Record of Promoting Liu”	Anonymous	Only surviving fragment: “Marquis Wu Pacifies the South”	Events before Zhuge Liang’s southern campaign.	Exceptional talent, humble and cautious, broad vision for the realm, diligent governance and care for the people, skilled in employing capable subordinates.
<b>“Ming-Dynasty Zaju Drama”</b>					
1	“Celebrating the Winter Solstice With a Shared Banquet of Peace”	Anonymous	Complete	Liu Bei hosts a banquet in Western Shu to celebrate the Winter Solstice.	Exceptional talent, skilled in governance, far-sighted vision.
2	“Zhuge Pacifies Shu”	Qiu Rucheng	Only first act survives	Zhuge Liang pacifies the southern regions.	Far-sighted vision, exceptional talent, policy of winning hearts, diligent governance.
3	“The Thatched Cottage”	Anonymous	Lost	Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage.	Exceptional talent, lofty ambition, broad vision for the realm, reclusive scholar style.
4	“Yellow Crane Tower”	Anonymous	Lost	Liu Bei drunkenly flees Yellow Crane Tower.	Extraordinary strategic brilliance, uncanny foresight, unwavering loyalty, exceptional talent.
5	Subduing Zhang Fei With Wit	Anonymous	Lost	Zhuge Liang subdues Zhang Fei.	Exceptional eloquence, intelligence and wisdom.

According to Table 1, there are a total of 11 Ming-Dynasty dramas related to Zhuge Liang, of which six belong to Ming-Dynasty Chuanqi and five to Ming-Dynasty Zaju. Among these 11 dramas, the contents of five have been lost, two survive only in part, and four have been preserved in their entirety. In Ming-Dynasty Chuanqi, two of the six dramas are lost, whereas in Ming-Dynasty Zaju, three of the five dramas are lost, indicating that the preservation of Ming-Dynasty Chuanqi is relatively better.

These 11 dramas collectively recount 22 stories from the Three Kingdoms period. The story of “Pacifying Nanzhong” appears three times; the stories of “Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage”, “Borrowing the East Wind”, “Yellow Crane Tower”, and the “Beauty Trap” each appear twice; the remaining 17 stories each appear once. This suggests that the Ming Dynasty particularly emphasized Zhuge Liang’s achievements in “Pacifying

Nanzhong". Given that the Ming Dynasty faced constant external threats and invasions, it was natural for the court to highlight Zhuge Liang's success in Nanzhong to demonstrate the importance placed on maintaining friendly relations with neighboring regions.

These 11 dramas collectively portray 20 different aspects of Zhuge Liang's character. Among them, nine dramas emphasize his exceptional talent; six highlight his extraordinary strategic brilliance; five depict his uncanny foresight; four showcase his unwavering loyalty and far-sighted vision; three emphasize his broad vision for the realm and diligence in governance and care for the people; two highlight his command over wind and weather, lofty ambition, reclusive scholar style, exceptional eloquence, and policy of winning hearts; and one drama each portrays his benevolence, inventive creativity, deep marital affection, rule by law, humility and caution, skill in employing capable subordinates, ability to govern effectively, and intelligence and wisdom.

From this statistical overview, it is evident that Ming-Dynasty Three Kingdoms dramas particularly emphasized Zhuge Liang's exceptional talent, extraordinary strategic brilliance, and uncanny foresight. Unlike the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi*) and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Ming-Dynasty dramas tended to deify Zhuge Liang's extraordinary abilities, portraying him as an almost semi-divine figure who could foresee all events. At the same time, these dramas downplayed his statecraft skills and noble character, which is a distinctive feature of Ming-Dynasty Three Kingdoms dramas.

Overall, as Zhuge Liang's image became increasingly deified, popular admiration for him grew even stronger, and he came to be seen as a supernatural figure capable of commanding the elements and knowing all things. This depiction is clearly far removed from the historical Zhuge Liang, yet it reflects the image held in the hearts of the general populace. For more than a thousand years, common people have longed for a second Zhuge Liang to appear and save them from calamities, which is why dramas emphasized his omniscient and omnipotent qualities. To this day, Zhuge Liang has endured as a cultural icon.

## References

Chen, Q. (2010). On Liu Bei's alternative image in Yuan-Dynasty Zaju: A case study of *Liu Xuande drunkenly flees Yellow Crane Tower*. *Da Wutai*, 53(2), 71-73.

Cui, L., & Lei, J. H. (2011). The historiographical value of Pei Songzhi's annotations in *Records of the Three Kingdoms*. *Journal of Xiangfan University*, 32(3), 10-12.

Fu, F. F. (2016). A brief analysis of the political and ethical ideas contained in Zhuge Liang's seven captures of Meng Huo. *Asia-Pacific Education*, 3(32), 199-200.

Hu, S. H., & Yang, B. (2018). *Collected Ming-Dynasty Three Kingdoms dramas*. Shanghai: Fudan University Press.

Ju, N. (2023). Three visits to the thatched cottage: The political alliance between Liu Bei's faction and the "Outsider" gentry of Jingzhou. *Journal of Literature and History*, 39(5), 46-51.

Li, Q. X. (2020). Shu Han narratives in Three Kingdoms dramas. *Reading*, 42(2), 78-86.

Li, X. H. (2013). *Dingzhi Chunqiu and the thatched cottage*. *Journal of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts*, 34(4), 58-65.

Lu, X. (1929). *A brief history of Chinese fiction*. Shanghai: Beixin Book Company.

Shen, Y. (1974). *Book of Song*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

Wang, J. D. (2006). A brief account of the rare edition *the record of Eastern Wu*. *Sichuan Drama*, 19(4), 89-91.

Wang, Z. Q. (2023). Zhuge Liang's seven captures of Meng Huo from the perspective of Shu Han orthodoxy. *Journal of Literature and History*, 39(5), 52-56.

Wu, J. S. (1995). On "Zhuge Liang borrows the east wind". *Journal of Jiangsu Institute of Education (Social Science Edition)*, 11(3), 48-49.

You, X. Y., & Xu, X. G. (2014). Psychological warfare during Zhuge Liang's southern campaign. *Lantai World*, 29(22), 81-82.

Zou, T. H. (2010). Examining Zhuge Liang's political wisdom through Guan Yu's defense of Huarong trail. *Hubei Education Leadership Science Forum*, 1(3), 76-77.