“I, a woman will fight them for you.”

「我虽是一妇人，愿与你出战。」

An intersectional analysis of Lady Zhurong, the only woman to lead an army into battle in

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms

Bachelor’s Thesis in Chinese language

Author: Stina Hinderson
Supervisor: Jenny Yuanyuan Wu
Examiner: Lung Lung Hu
Subject/main field of study: Chinese literature
Course code: GKI2QA
Credits: 15
Date of examination: 5/6/2023

At Dalarna University it is possible to publish the student thesis in full text in DiVA. The publishing is open access, which means the work will be freely accessible to read and download on the internet. This will significantly increase the dissemination and visibility of the student thesis.

Open access is becoming the standard route for spreading scientific and academic information on the internet. Dalarna University recommends that both researchers as well as students publish their work open access.

I give my/we give our consent for full text publishing (freely accessible on the internet, open access):

Yes ☒
No ☐
Abstract

Beside the innumerable male characters in the Chinese classic, The Romance of The Three Kingdoms, there is one female general: Lady Zhurong (祝融夫人). This thesis addresses the research gap in studying the unique case of Lady Zhurong, the only woman in the novel that leads an army in battle. By using a qualitative method, the thesis investigates how Lady Zhurong’s portrayal is influenced by her gender. An intersectional theory is used to contextualize how her ethnicity as Nanman (南蛮) and her social status intersects with her gender. Furthermore, it compares her to how other minor male generals are portrayed. The analysis finds that Lady Zhurong’s character should be understood from the context of her ethnic background and the overall negative portrayal of the Nanman. Nevertheless, as suggested in the story through the description of the Nanman, some gender norms differ between them and the Chinese society of the time. This enables her to have more autonomy than other women which in turn enables her to fight on the battlefield and lead an army. Despite the general negative depiction of the Nanman, Lady Zhurong’s portrayal, performance, and the expectations of her as a general is equivalent to that of the male generals in the story. Compared to other Nanman generals she even outperforms them. However, her character should not be understood as merely an emasculation of the other Nanman-generals. Lady Zhurong has agency, and the findings can contribute to our wider understanding of women’s multifaceted roles in traditional Chinese society.

Keywords: Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Lady Zhurong, Nanman, Chinese literature, female character, female general
摘要
经典名著《三国演义》虽然刻画了无数的男性将领，但它却只塑造了唯一一位女性将领——南蛮女将“祝融夫人”。本论文以这个少见的角色为研究主题，采用质性研究的方法，以祝融夫人这一独特的女将形象为例，分析研究小说人物形象的塑造如何受到角色性别的影响。并利用交叉性理论的分析视角，结合祝融夫人的“南蛮”身份，探究民族背景与社会阶层如何与性别交互影响。此外，本文也分析比较祝融夫人和其他男性将领角色。所以本文发现因为小说对南蛮的评价负面，因此必须在这个背景当中理解祝融夫人的角色。尽管南蛮和当时的汉人社会都有性别角色的差异，但祝融夫人，比较三国演义上的其他女性角色有更多的自主权，甚而统率部队上阵。在对南蛮的普遍负面描述中，祝融的军功和野心都是比肩男将军，甚至比其他南蛮将军更出色。然而，这个角色的功能并不仅仅是削弱其他南蛮将领，而具有个体能动性。这些发现有助于我们更广泛地理解传统中国社会中女性的多元面貌。

关键词： 三国演义，祝融夫人，南蛮，文学，女性角色，女将
Table of Content

Abstract ................................................................................................................................................... 2
摘要 ........................................................................................................................................................ 3
1. Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 5
   1.1 Background ................................................................................................................................... 5
   1.2. Problem formulation .................................................................................................................... 6
   1.3. Aim .............................................................................................................................................. 7
   1.4. Limitations of scope and aim ....................................................................................................... 8
2. Literature review ................................................................................................................................. 8
3. Theory ................................................................................................................................................. 9
4. Method .............................................................................................................................................. 10
   4.1 Use of the word ”Nanman” ......................................................................................................... 11
5. Empirical part .................................................................................................................................... 12
   5.1.1 Background .............................................................................................................................. 12
   5.1.2 Brief introduction of Lady Zhurong ......................................................................................... 12
   5.2.1. Meng Huo and the setting ....................................................................................................... 13
   5.2.2 Lady Zhurong and Her Battles ................................................................................................. 15
   5.2.3. After Being Captured .............................................................................................................. 16
   5.3. Army size and weapons ............................................................................................................. 17
6. Analysis ............................................................................................................................................ 17
   6.1. Portrayal ..................................................................................................................................... 18
   6.2. Intersectional analysis ................................................................................................................ 18
      6.2.1. The Nanman identity ........................................................................................................... 18
      6.2.2. Social status ........................................................................................................................ 20
   6.3. Lady Zhurong compared to other characters ............................................................................. 21
      6.3.1. Lady Zhurong’s relationship with Meng Huo and Comparison ............................................. 21
      6.3.2. Compared to other male generals ......................................................................................... 22
      6.3.4. Lady Zhurong’s interactions with Han-generals ................................................................. 25
   6.4. Emasculation .............................................................................................................................. 25
   6.5. Influence and significance ......................................................................................................... 27
7. Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 28
8. References........................................................................................................................................ 31
1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (三国演义) is considered one of the great classics of China. Based on historical records of the wars and political struggles that unfolded after the fall of the Han-dynasty. The characters in the novel are mostly based on the historical people that lived during the era but reimagined one thousand years later and should be understood from the lens of the late Yuan and Ming dynasty rather than a historically accurate account of the events. Or as Lu Xun put it “seven parts history, three parts fiction.” (In de Crespigny, 2018, p. 450). The novel is commonly attributed to Luo Guanzhong and was later rewritten by Mao Lun and his son Mao Zonggang. It has been highly influential for hundreds of years and still is to this day with references and quotes from the book appearing in everything from politics to pop culture. It has been used as source material inspiring a wide range of tv-series and video games which has popularized the novel among a contemporary audience outside of China, especially in East Asia (Besio, Tung, 2012).

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is perhaps best known for its many heroes and has more than 1000 characters in the novel (Fan, Li, 2021). Men with agency who were able to change the course of history. A Chinese “great man theory” packaged into one epic novel. But what about the women of the story? How are they portrayed?

Throughout the novel, the fate of many women is far from great - women are often used as mere tools in a political game and end up in the crossfire of war and political intrigue. In a quantitative bachelor thesis about the female characters of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Nilsson (2020), found that the most common descriptive characteristic among all women is being sad and close to tears. Usually due to the death or the fate of another character. However, as he also found, this characteristic does not apply to all women. One of these characters in the story is Lady Zhurong (祝融夫人), a Nanman (南蛮) female general who is the only woman in the story that leads an army on the battlefield.
1.2. Problem formulation

Lady Zhurong differs greatly from the other female characters in the story. However, is her characterization equal to that of how male generals are depicted? Or are there any differences? Ying (1993) stated that the prominence of some female characters in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms and their role in the story emphasizes a difference from the historical records and serves as a clear example of where the writer chose to depart from the official historic records. Researching this topic can therefore provide further pointers to look into why a female general occurs in the story. The differences from official records can also serve as a case study of how female characters are portrayed in fiction during the late Yuan and Ming-dynasty, when the novel was written. While that is outside the scope of the current thesis, the findings can lay the groundwork for continued interdisciplinary research within Chinese history and literature.

Therefore, the research questions are:

How is Lady Zhurong portrayed? How does her portrayal differ from men in a comparable situation? What is her significance to the story?

How is Lady Zhurong’s intersectional identity portrayed in the story and what are the implications?

The clear choice of character to compare her with would be other Nanman generals who also lead an army in several battles against the same enemy. In order to interpret what impact her gender plays and if there are any differences between them. As well as further compare her to other minor generals from the majority society.

Another aspect of Lady Zhurong is that she is Nanman, and lives in a society on the periphery of the influence of Han-Chinese rule, which differs from the imperial Chinese society. Does her ethnic background intertwine with and impact how she is portrayed?
1.3. Aim

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the role of a female character in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Emphasizing on a unique character who enters a traditionally male space, which is the battlefield as a general. It builds on previous research done about female characters in the story using a close reading method in order to dive deeper and research the character. The findings of the thesis can potentially question the simplified notion that all women in the story are merely tools without any agency due to the strict social control.

The broader objective of the thesis is to contribute to the understanding of women’s portrayal and role in traditional Chinese society. With the caveat that The Romance of The Three Kingdoms was written more than one thousand years after the events, thus not emphasizing if the portrayal of the characters and their situations are accurate or not. However, arguably it will still contribute to the understanding of the general view of women in the Ming-dynasty when it was written.

Additionally, since the thesis will touch upon the depiction of Nanman when related to Lady Zhurong and her portrayal, the thesis may also contribute to the understanding of the view of Nanman during the Ming-dynasty society. Research about the depiction of Nanman in the novel is sparse and can contribute to how they were viewed by the Imperial China.

While there has been research conducted about The Romance of the Three Kingdoms before in a wide range of aspects, the vast majority is in Chinese and not as accessible to the international academic community. Among the papers written in English, very few have conducted research on female characters, and as far as the author of this paper is able to find none of them has written extensively about Lady Zhurong. In turn, the ones that do discuss female characters foremost have a critical viewpoint, emphasizing the small role of the characters and that they are relatively insignificant. Depending on the findings of this thesis, it can add a layer of complexity to how they were depicted.
1.4. Limitations of scope and aim

Due to the length of the novel, the scope of the thesis is to research one outliner character in the story. Although there is a limitation with the selection of Lady Zhurong since she, like most women, only appears in the story for a limited time. Tian (2015) argues that female characters in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms are in general not as well-developed as the main male characters, of which some women only appear in one chapter of the book. This is why Lady Zhurong’s character will be compared to that of other male generals in order to investigate the manner that she is described but also highlight what description and information is omitted.

2. Literature review

There has been plenty of research done about The Romance of the Three Kingdoms before in a wide range of aspects; ranging from a cluster analysis of interactions between characters (Fan & Li 2021) to its influence on internet culture in Tian (2015). However, the vast majority of the research about the novel is in Chinese and not as accessible to the international academic community. Among the papers written in English, very few focus on the female characters and how they are portrayed. Besio and Tung (2012) mentions the wider role of women briefly, contrasting the recurring theme of the importance of brotherhood over women. Characters portrayed mainly in a negative light such as Cao Cao and Cao Pi are womanizers, while heroes such as Guan Yu show no interest in women. His disinterest is portrayed as a practice of virtue, and thus the women he interacts with (or rather does not) plays the role of emphasizing these noble qualities of the male characters.

Zooming in on research that focuses mainly on the role of women in the story. Ying (1993) did a comparative analysis of two “honey traps” in the storyline involving the female characters Diaochan and Lady Sun, respectively. Nilsson (2020) has a quantitative approach and made a study of the role and main characteristics of all female characters in the novel. As far as the author of this paper is able to find, there are no papers written extensively about Lady Zhurong. She is mentioned briefly in the findings of Nilsson as an outliner character (2020). She is also briefly mentioned in Cuiping (2021) where the author emphasizes the gender segregation occurring at the time of the story. She mentions Lady Zhurong as a character that crosses into the typical male space in that she can drink with men and fight on horseback. Cuiping (2020)
draws the conclusion that it is because the author of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms considered her a “barbarian”.

Besides the research conducted about the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, there is more about the female warriors in Chinese classical literature. Hua Mulan is perhaps the most famous character, especially outside of China. Using an intersectional theory Li (2014) points out that Hua Mulan is not an ethnical Han-woman, which would imply that her behavior was not as unorthodox. As she belonged to the tribal people in the North where horse riding and military knowledge are more common traits, including for women. A similar analysis of this aspect could be made in the case of Lady Zhurong since she is Nanman and comes from the periphery of Han-Chinese influence.

Within the wider research conducted about the portrayal of women in Chinese literature, Altenburger (2009) has written extensively on the role of female knights-errant (女侠) and discussed the portrayal of such a character throughout different points in history. A trope he mentions in late-Ming and Qing dynasty is that a female warrior could be used in the story not to represent female strength but rather as “a moral mirror for the degenerating men folk” (Altenburger, 2009 page 45). The act and presence of a female warrior was used to criticize and point out male inability to act. Far from empowering or pointing out the ability of the female character it does the opposite by acting as criticism of the male character's personality. Altenburger (2009) mostly writes about the knight-errant characters, but he also mentions female generals (女将), which he considered a different category with different tropes. Female generals are usually part of a family of famous generals. With the exception being Hua Mulan, the female general does not disguise herself as a man, making her gender apparent even on the battlefield. The character should be understood in a positive light as someone committing a righteous act to defend something together with their husband or brother or alternatively as a widow replacing the late husband.

3. Theory

This thesis uses feminist literary theory. According to Showalter (1981) the theory uses perspective of “the reader,” where the reader of the book analyzes how women in the story are portrayed. The possibilities of topics that can be analyzed are wide, ranging from stereotypical portrayals of women to the usage of women as a metaphor such as semiotic sign. There is another possible perspective of analysis, which will not be part of this thesis, that is of women
as “the writer,” analyzing a woman author and the relationship between her gender and her authorship using different genres combined with feminist analysis such as psychoanalytic, historical, or cultural. One central aspect of the perspective of the reader is by being mindful and considering the gender it can uncover dynamics in a story related to a woman's role and her image.

Tying the theory into the aim and research questions, the thesis will use the feminist literary theory to analyze Lady Zhurong to understand her character's place compared to men in a comparable situation and to analyze the implications of her character’s presence and portrayal.

To narrow down the scope of the abovementioned theory, the thesis will specifically use an intersectional theory. One of the most significant recent thinkers in the feminist theoretical space is Butler (2002). According to her theory, being “a woman” is not all there is to a person’s identity. Instead, identity depends on the cultural framework in that “gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities [...] it becomes impossible to separate out gender from the political and cultural intersections...” (2002, page 19) An intersectional analysis of Lady Zhurong’s character adds another dimension of the analysis. It can provide clarity to certain aspects of her character since they may not only be related to her gender. In addition, it can clarify how other characters view her as well as add to our understanding of her portrayal. Adding and comparing the additional dimensions of her character limits the risk of being revisionist and misinterprets the impact of Lady Zhurong’s gender on her portrayal. Since certain aspects of her portrayal might be explained by her ethnicity or social status. With the caveat that the findings of the analysis are interpretations.

4. Method

This thesis will be a comparative qualitative study of Lady Zhurong and how she is portrayed in the role as a female general compared to that of her male counterparts. It will describe aspects such as Lady Zhurong’s role in the story, her behavior, and her relationship with other characters. She will be compared to other male characters, who are also part of the same storyline in the same chapters. The way they interact, their behavior and relationship to other people will be compared with her to see if there are any differences between how the two are described. The method is chosen because it can in a structured way compare the characters and
use the theory in order to find if there are any patterns, or differences in how she is described compared to her male counterparts and what implications it has for the role of Lady Zhurong.

The thesis will use the “close reading method” where the main source material is the Romance of The Three Kingdoms. The method entails staying close to the text and reading it thoroughly in order to notice hidden layers and help dissect the text (Schur, 1998). According to Jockers (2013) the method is the primary methodology in literature studies and builds heavily on observation and interpretation. One downside, however, compared to natural science fields is that findings are not testable and the conclusions subjective as they are not repeatable like an experiment would be. While true, the interpretation and qualitative analysis in literature studies are still valid as they can be used to shed light and enrich other readers' experience of a text (Jockers, 2013). Since context is crucial in the intersectional theory which this thesis intends to use, the method is appropriate to discover and reread the text focusing on the context through different aspects of her identity.

The thesis will be based on the English translation of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (the Moss Roberts unabridged version). The translation is based on the Mao Zonggang edition from the 1660s, which according to the afterword in The Romance of the Three kingdom (Luo, 1994) is the best-known version in China. A limitation with not using the source material in the original language, comes with the risk of ambiguity and mistranslations which can potentially impact the analysis and interpretation of the character. The choice is due to the language skill of the writer of this thesis who is not well versed in classical Chinese and would not be able to base the analysis of findings from the Chinese version alone.

4.1 Use of the word ”Nanman”

The thesis uses the word Nanman (南蛮) to describe Lady Zhurong’s ethnical group who are the native inhabitants of the of the Southern campaign story arc. Nanman literally means the “south(ern) barbarian(s)” which is an old word referring to the Miao, Yao and Yi ethnic groups (Bradley, 2001). The word has negative connotations, but it is the word used by the writer and the characters throughout the novel to describe the antagonists of this story line. In the translation of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms that this thesis is based on, only the word Man (barbarian) is used and the word nan, which means south, is omitted. However, since this thesis discusses gender, using the word Man frequently to refer to an ethnic group might be confusing. That is why the word Nanman is used throughout this thesis.
5. Empirical part

5.1.1 Background

The character Lady Zhurong only appears in chapter 90 in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms and like many of the Nanman generals is a fictional character. She is considered Nanman and comes from the periphery of the interest sphere of the historical Chinese empire. At the start of the Southern Campaign storyline the Nanman have been pillaging the Southern Riverlands and have rebelled against the empire by breaking from their status of a tributary state.

The new ruler of the Riverlands is Zhuge Liang, who is one of the most famous characters in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms. At this point in the story, he is the de facto ruler of one of the three kingdoms, the Shu-Han. The story arc of the Nanman tells the story of the many battles that Zhuge Liang’s army fights against them in order to pacify and conquer the area during the so-called Southern expeditions (南征) (Peng, 2011). The different tribes that they encounter each have their own characteristics that differ from the majority Han-rulled kingdoms. Lady Zhurong is married to Meng Huo who is considered the King of all the Nanman tribes and thus the main antagonist of the Southern expeditions story.

5.1.2 Brief introduction of Lady Zhurong

Lady Zhurong is first introduced when she enters the conversation of Meng Huo and his military assembly. She does so by laughingly interrupting their conversation and appearing from behind a screen. She then offers to lead an army into battle against Zhuge Liang’s army.

Lady Zhurong is not described by her appearance but rather by her skill in battle. Her appearance is not known at all throughout the story. Not all characters' appearances are, especially minor ones like Lady Zhurong. Instead, she is introduced with her qualities related to fighting. She is portrayed as especially skilled in knife throwing, which she also demonstrates in a fighting scene. She is described as someone who never misses her mark when throwing knives. This description is similar to that of male heroes who are very skilled in using a certain type of weapons. Such as Ma Chao whose “martial skill surpasses that of other warriors” (p. 502), or Xiahou Dun “Since childhood Dun had trained with spears and clubs and by fourteen was learning martial arts” (p. 39). Focus on the skills as a character trait is not only limited to male characters. However, it is usually also combined with a comment about that they are beautiful. For example, Lady Xu, is described as “a beautiful and intelligent woman”
(p. 295), or Diaochan, who is described to have unearthly beauty and skill in the art of dance and song (p. 63). Even Lady Guo who was known to have been a clever child who got the nickname “a king among women” from her father, is also introduced with the sentence “Cao Pi took for ranking concubine a woman of great beauty” (p.696) As far as gender being used as a marker for her identity, there is an absence of reactions towards Lady Zhurong specifically being a woman on the battlefield. However, Zhuge Liang’s general Zhang Ni is described as marveling at her presence when he meets her in battle for the first time.

As for her name, Lady Zhurong is a namesake with the legendary deity Zhurong, which is the god of fire (Leeming, 1994). The accounts and stories of Zhurong differ according to different sources and traditions. Common to the stories is that he usually defeats the water god Gonggong in a grand battle. According to Shanhajin (2008) Zhurong is tasked with killing Gun, who has failed to produce a solution to quell the great flash floods. In common with the god is that Lady Zhurong also hails from the Southern part of China. In the story the god is described as her ancestor, perhaps emphasizing that she is special and hails from a powerful family, rather than any other similarities between the stories and character itself. Lady Zhurong does not wield or have any clear connection to fire in the story.

5.2 The Story of Lady Zhurong in the Three Kingdom

5.2.1. Meng Huo and the setting

To contextualize Lady Zhurong, she is from the beginning introduced as married to Meng Huo, the Nanman king. He is first introduced as the main antagonist in chapter 86. When one of Zhuge Liang’s generals finally encounters him on the battlefield he is described as “crowned with a dark gold cap inlaid with gems.” (p. 666) The story then continues to describe his clothes. In one battle he is also depicted riding on a red ox (p. 675). His character is notorious since he ends up getting captured and released by Zhuge Liang’s troops seven times until he surrenders. The existence of Meng Huo himself outside of the novel and his ethnic identity has been debated. Some deny his existence as a historical figure, and some consider him as an early Han-migrant to the region. In traditional Yi-folk narratives, he is considered a folk hero and a part of the Yi ethnicity (Peng, 2011).

The chapter in which Lady Zhurong is introduced starts off by describing the Silver Pit Hollow which is where Lady Zhurong and Meng Huo reside. The general area of the Nanman is
described as “lies too far [...] to be affected by the civilizing influence of the imperial court” (p. 661) The customs of the Silver Pit Hollow are described in great detail, such as that they sacrifice bigger animals or even people from other places, in order to divine the spirits of their ancestors. The customs of the Nanman in Silver Pit Hollow are all likely to differ greatly from the customs of Han-people of the Three Kingdoms era and considered backwards. For example, it is emphasized that the Nanman does not use medicine and instead only prays to a shaman when they are sick. They are also described as lacking rule of law, instead perpetrators are executed immediately, which is of course in stark contrast to the legal systems of other parts of China at the time. They are also described as eating snakes and elephant meat when the harvest did not ripen. On top of the listed customs of the Nanman there is a sentence which describes a gender-related practice:

“When women grew to maturity, they bathed in a stream where male and female mixed freely and coupled without parental prohibition, a practice called “learning the art” (p. 684)

The description suggests a premarital relation, which also stands in stark contrast to the gender roles, and relations between the sexes of the time among the Han-people. The emphasis on the sexual nature of the interaction is both by using the words “maturity,” and that the practice is referred to as “learning the art.” At the same time the interactions are described as “without parental prohibition” which emphasizes that the practice is normalized and that it is a part of their society. At the same time the act is expressed as “mixed freely” which does sound like the woman might have some sort of agency in the situation, rather than if it were expressed in a different way that emphasized the power asymmetry and agency that men had. Nevertheless, it is likely another way of expressing the premarital relations of the Nanman people that stands in stark contrast to the strongly gender-segregated society. In the commentaries made by Mao Zonggang (2006) he emphasizes the incompatible practice of the Nanman with the Han, emphasizing the mixed bathing, the divining of ghost as well as other practices such as food.

On the other hand, there are some practices that seem similar with the mainly gender segregated majority society as well. When Lady Zhurong first appears in the story, she does so by appearing from behind a screen. Implying that she was eavesdropping behind it and perhaps not able to be part of the meeting. Similar to other characters, Cuiping (2021) has pointed out that Lady Cai is depicted as frequently eavesdropping on her husband Liu Biao and then gives him strategic advice.
While other Nanman women except for Lady Zhurong are not frequent in the story there is one interesting example. In one chapter a trap is laid for Meng Huo and his generals during a feast. As they celebrate the schemer Yang Feng, is using Nanman women as part of the plan. To trick Meng Huo, he suggests “let the [Nan]man women following the army who are experts at the sword-and-shield dance offer us some entertainment [...] Moments later dozens of women skipped into the tent, their hair hanging loose and their feet bare.” (p. 682) Once Yang Feng has revealed his plans and Meng Huo and his generals are captured the women form a barrier inside the tent to prevent any approach from outside. While not clear from the context, it is likely that it is through their martial skills that the dozens of women are stopping others from approaching the tent. Enabling Meng Huo and his generals to be taken hostage and later brought to Zhuge Liang.

5.2.2 Lady Zhurong and Her Battles

Lady Zhurong first appears when Meng Huo is confronted by the news that King Duosi has lost the Three Rivers and has been killed in battle by Zhuge Liang’s advancing army. Meng Huo is described as “too agitated to act” (Luo, p. 685):

“Suddenly from behind the screen someone stepped forward and, laughing loudly, said, “A man, and such a fool! I, a woman, will fight them for you!”” (p. 685)

Lady Zhurong oozes with confidence with the almost theatrical dramatic entrance, breaking the silence with her laughter. Which is nonemphatic and aimed at the demise and failure of King Duosi. Almost immediately after offering her help Lady Zhurong sets out with her army. She engages with the general Zhang Ni in battle. After a duel on horseback, she defeats him by throwing a knife in his arm. Following that he falls off his horse and is captured by her troops. Lady Zhurong’s soldiers also capture the general Ma Zhong by tripping his horse. Thus, her first battle is successful and both Ma Zhong and Zhang Ni are defeated and captured.

Lady Zhurong’s victory is celebrated by the pleased Meng Huo who throws a feast in her honor. Lady Zhurong is participating in the celebration and the story mentions that they drank, laughed, and made merry together. During the celebration Lady Zhurong makes the strategic decision to order the execution of the captured enemy generals Zhang Ni and Ma Zhong during the celebration. Meng Huo then stops the guards and tells them not to execute the prisoners since Zhuge Liang has spared him several times. Lady Zhurong agrees with him.
Following that day Lady Zhurong engages in another battle with Zhuge Liang’s other commanders. During the first battle she meets Zhao Zilong and the day after Wei Yan. They both flee the battlefield after dueling with her. Their strategy is to try to trick Lady Zhurong to follow them and lure her into a trap and then capture her. The fighting is described as intense, even though Wei Yan is described as feigning defeat. Described as suspicious of their sudden retreats Lady Zhurong does not pursue after they have disengaged. It is not until after the third duel, which again ends with Zhao Zilong retreating and when Lady Zhurong is about to retreat. She then gets taunted by Wei Yan's troops. This time she makes a chase but is finally ambushed and captured.

As a prisoner she is taken to Zhuge Liang’s army camp and the two of them share a short interaction which is non-verbal in the story. She is then sent to another tent to compose herself, likely with refreshment as has been the case for the rest of the captured generals. Lady Zhurong is then exchanged for the captured generals Zhang Ni and Ma Zhong and then returns to Meng Huo’s side, who receives her “with both joy and anger in his heart” (p. 686). She does not participate in any more battles in the story. In contrast, Zhuge Liang's generals Zhao Zilong and Wei Yan lead the following battle against the Nanman. The structure of the story and fate of Lady Zhurong is similar to the rest of the Nanman generals. Since they usually only participate in battles until they lose or are killed and are then replaced by another general with special traits and tactics. The exception being Meng Huo since he is the main antagonist of the Nanman story arc.

5.2.3. After Being Captured

After Lady Zhurong’s capture and release, the next counterattack is led by King Mulu. It is depicted as a strange and a unique sight to the officers of Zhuge Liang’s army. This is expressed by the fact that King Mulu is using wild animals as well as that most people in the attacking army are naked. The faces of the attackers are also described as crude and ugly. In another battle Zhuge Liang surveys Wutugu’s Nanman forces and finds that they “looked so repulsive that they hardly seemed human” (p. 688)

After losing several more battles the Nanman tribes finally lost a decisive battle against Zhuge Liang. Meng Huo has, according to the story, been captured and released seven times in total. When Zhuge Liang’s forces occupy their stronghold, multiple of Meng Huo’s generals including Lady Zhurong are captured, and she is treated the same way as her male counterparts.
She is taken together with Meng Huo, Meng You, and the chief of Dailai. As captives she is drinking together with them in the same tent. When Meng Huo finally decides to surrender, he and the rest, including Lady Zhurong, crawl to Zhuge Liang’s tent to admit defeat. Meng Huo cryingly tells Zhuge Liang’s officer that he is not completely unfamiliar with ritual and that he agrees to surrender. In the end Zhuge Liang is depicted as a benevolent and cunning ruler since he puts the Nanman back in charge of the newly conquered areas and according to the story they were grateful and vowed to never rebel again.

5.3. Army size and weapons

When Lady Zhurong sets out, she is leading an army of 50.000 men, and several hundred commanders. The army includes both their own troops combined with their allied forces. Rather than any of their other generals or allies, Lady Zhurong is put in charge to lead them. In comparison, King Mulu is in the same chapter depicted as leading 30.000 troops, whereas Lady Zhurong is leading almost twice the size of his.

During the first battle with Zhuge Liang’s army, Meng Huo provided the three fighting chieftains with 50.000 troops each. The size is far from the largest forces in the story but nevertheless they are still a substantial force. Comparing it to the war between Dong Zhuo and the eighteen lords in the beginning of the story, in one of the battles Dong Zhuo led 200.000 men divided into two armies. Whereas his vanguard, Lü Bu, commanded an army of 30.000 troops on the same battlefield (p. 45).

Except for Lady Zhurong throwing-knifes, while on horseback she is also described as wielding a 1.8 zhang long spear. For comparison one of the most famous warriors of the story, Zhang Fei, is also famous for wielding a 1.8 zhang long spear. No one else in the story is using a spear that is described by its size except for Zhang Fei’s son Zhang Bao who inherits the same spear after his father’s demise (p. 708).

6. Analysis

This analysis starts off by summarizing how Lady Zhurong is portrayed, which answers the first research question. Then analyzes her portrayal in general and uses an intersectional analysis, emphasizing on her ethnic background as a Nanman of the portrayal and the impact of her social background. It then compares her portrayal to that of male generals. The final part
of the analysis touches upon what her significance to the story is. In the following chapter, the Conclusion, the findings are summaries and discussed.

6.1. Portrayal

Lady Zhurong is foremost characterized by her skills related to knife throwing and martial arts, as well as her strategic skills on the battlefield. Characteristics related to different skills rather than personality is common for both male and female characters in the story. After all it is a story based on the historical legends of heroes. Lady Zhurong’s skills are both described and demonstrated in battle. She receives admiration both from Meng Huo as well as one enemy general that she faces in battle. In many ways the scenes and her performance are similar to how her male counterparts are described and portrayed in the story. As far as her personality goes, she is a relatively undeveloped character with only a few given traits. Her expressed thoughts and feelings are limited to being reactive to her circumstances, as well as only having one spoken line throughout the story. Little is known about her and her background except for that her ancestor is the fire god Zhurong as well as her social status through her relationship with Meng Huo and her brother.

Lady Zhurong’s appearance as established is not described at all. It is common that the appearance of minor characters is omitted, including some of the other Nanman kings and generals like Meng You and Lady Zhurong’s brother. Meng Huo’s attire is described but he is also the major antagonist of the story line. However, when comparing Lady Zhurong to other female characters, many are described in general terms such as that they are “beautiful,” while nothing is stated about Lady Zhurong. The only physiological traits that are known about Lady Zhurong to the reader is that she is a woman and a Nanman, which makes it appropriate to analyze her from these two perspectives.

6.2. Intersectional analysis

6.2.1. The Nanman identity

Investigating the character Lady Zhurong from an intersectional lens can further deepen the understanding of her portrayal. Such analysis underlines the significance that her gender plays since it sheds light on other aspects that intersect with her portrayal and her role in the story.
It is clear that the view of the Nanman shown in the novel has a profound impact on how Lady Zhurong and the other Nanman characters are depicted. While gender is a part of her character, so is the description of her ethnicity in the story. The author Luo Guanzhong as well as the editor’s father and son Mao, is not part of the Nanman-ethnicity and the way they depict the society in the novel is radically different from the majority society in the rest of the story. The Nanman is radically different from the Imperial Chinese society, both at the time of the story as well as when it was written, during the late Yuan and Ming-dynasty. The story reinforces stereotypes about what is in their mind uncivilized people and exotifies the Nanman with the depictions of the customs of the Silver Pit Hollow. As described in the empirical part it “lies too far [...] to be affected by the civilizing influence of the imperial court” (p. 661). Emphasizing the strangeness and backwardness of their different customs.

Sometimes the depiction of the Nanman even goes so far as to dehumanize them such as King Wutugu’s forces which are described as repulsive and not looking like humans. In comparison, Lady Zhurong is not described in any such way and by herself is not portrayed in an outright negative light. Instead, she is a namesake with and a descendant from a mythological god. Portrayed as a formidable opponent that meets multiple of the generals in one-on-one battle, and even defeats and captures one single handedly.

At the same time Lady Zhurong’s portrayal and contribution to the story is hard to separate from the background and overall notion towards the Nanman. Stepping back and considering the story arc as a whole, her character could be interpreted as yet another example of the unconventional ways that the Nanman-tribes wage wars. In that, in another battle the general uses wild animals as part of his forces. Zhuge Liang’s generals marvel when they encounter the wild animals that they are facing in battle and when they first encounter Lady Zhurong. Her mere existence can be seen as yet another exotic enemy for Zhuge Liang’s army to face in battle. Unconventional and different from the battles waged with the “civilized” warlords of the Han-society.

Nevertheless, the depiction of Lady Zhurong as part of the Nanman people is likely to create a leeway from some of the gender norms of the Han-society. In one of the commentaries made by Mao Zonggang (2006) he compares Lady Zhurong in short to the female characters Diao Chan and Lady Sun. Stating that Diao Chan could have been a female general but never did
and that Lady Sun who was fond of warfare never fought on the battlefield. Both relatively fleshted out female characters in the story who play a significant role in some of the schemes and political intrigues of the story. While Mao’s reflection lacks the reason Lady Zhurong is able to become a general, he does emphasize the uniqueness of Lady Zhurong’s existence in the story. An interpretation of the story is that her being Nanman enables her to become skilled in battle and even participate in it. Since there are no other women generals in the entire story in the Han-society, especially not any that leads an army into the battlefield, her depiction as from another ethnic group and society is likely to permit it. Implying that the expectations and limitations that her gender has differs from other ethnic groups within the majority society at the time. Especially since Lady Zhurong is a fictional character, unlike Lady Sun and Diao Chan, whose fates are relatively known. Making Lady Zhurong a general in the Han-society and in the time when the novel was written seemed impossible. While some women who knew martial arts, such as Lady Sun, could not make use of their skill on the battlefield. Neither were they asked to fight in a battle, nor would they have been able to volunteer to do so.

6.2.2. Social status

Another part of the intersectional perspective is class. Lady Zhurong’s social status is not similar to that of other female characters in the story. She has a more prominent role due to the importance of a male character that she has a relationship with. In this case it is in terms of being the wife of the King of the Nanman, Meng Huo. In comparison, other prominent female characters in positions of power are the daughter, sister, or mother to a man in power. Lady Zhurong is not there on her own merit alone and is not someone who has advanced in rank within the army, but rather due to her relation to both Meng Huo and likely related to the former chief of Dailai, perhaps his daughter. This position has enabled her to learn martial arts and perhaps how to lead an army. If other female warriors or generals except for Lady Zhurong exist among the Nanman they are not mentioned, that is because she is likely a rarity among them as well. During Yang Feng’s scheme to capture Meng Huo we learn that there are dozens of women that are experts in the sword-and-shield dance. While they seem to move with the army their roles are likely to be more related to the entertainment of generals rather than being part of a warrior unit, by the way that they are portrayed in the story. Their class and social status likely differ from Lady Zhurong. However, since they, like Lady Zhurong, have learned martial arts there seems to be a possibility for at least some women to do so among the Nanman. Lady Zhurong’s role as not just a warrior but rather a general leading an army to the battlefield
would make her similar to other female generals in other stories. The female generals in other stories, as Altenburger (2009) pointed out, are usually related to a successful male general and commonly rise to the occasion and fight in a battle in a desperate time of need. Making Lady Zhurong similar to the trope, despite being Nanman. Interpreting her from Altenburg’s perspective, she, like female generals in other stories, is portrayed in a positive light. Even as an antagonist she is setting off into the battlefield to protect her people.

6.3. Lady Zhurong compared to other characters

6.3.1. Lady Zhurong’s relationship with Meng Huo and Comparison

Lady Zhurong and Meng Huo's relationship and his prior knowledge of her skill is likely to play a role in that she is given the responsibility from him to lead an army. Meng Huo is portrayed as admiring her skill and is relieved that she volunteers to fight while they are in a desperate situation, losing his allies against an approaching stronger enemy. Meng Huo is not portrayed as being conflicted about Lady Zhurong’s participation in war. He is not described as having any sense of need to protect her or object to her action. After she is captured and returned, Meng Huo is described as being relieved that she is back, even though he is also upset about the situation. The story does not convey why Lady Zhurong does not participate in any other battles afterwards.

Interesting to note is that in the story when Lady Zhurong’s characteristics and skills in battle are presented they are described from the perspective of Meng Huo as he gazes upon her when she makes her entrance and offers to help. The description seems to be part of his decision-making process when he then quickly thanks her for volunteering and his admiration towards his wife.

In the story it is clear that Meng Huo and Lady Zhurong due to their different rank and status do not play an equally significant role and that Meng Huo, as the main antagonist of the story arc, occurs more frequently. More is known about Meng Huo’s relationships with others as well as his status as the King of the Nanman, which gives him other opportunities to make decisions and emphasizes his importance in the interactions with Zhuge Liang and his generals.

Overall Meng Huo’s character and feelings are described more vividly, with a wide range of emotions. For example, as being too agitated to act when one of his generals is killed in battle,
and that he has both joy and anger in his heart when Lady Zhurong returns after being released from captivity. These feelings are not described in the same detail when it comes to Lady Zhurong. She is described as happy when she is praised and when she is making merry during her celebration. She is also suspicious when Zhuge Liang's generals retreat to try to lure her to follow and capture her. Meng Huo is a character with a back story, a personality, with flaws and a character that to some extent is able to grow when he decides to give up and surrender to Zhuge Liang. No such expressions or growth exists in Lady Zhurong’s story arc. She starts off as a strong warrior, fights on the battlefield as a strong warrior and while she finally is out maneuvered and captured, it does not discredit her stance as a strong warrior.

6.3.2. Compared to other male generals

Comparing Lady Zhurong to other minor male generals who are present in the story for a similar duration as she is, paints a clearer picture than only comparing her to Meng Huo.

In broad terms Lady Zhurong’s story arc and the description of her in many ways reflect how male generals are depicted in the rest of the story. Other generals are also described primarily as skillful in martial arts and the story has her illustrate her talent when she successfully captures two of Zhuge Liang’s generals on the battlefield. Their portrayals are in many ways similar, also when it comes to how underdeveloped they are as characters, with few interactions and not much known about how they think or feel. In that sense a conclusion cannot be drawn about the impact on Lady Zhurong’s gender in her portrayal compared to the male characters. The size of Lady Zhurong’s army is similar to how other generals are portrayed in the story. While not among the biggest, it is considerably larger than some of the male generals in the same story arc. It is the exact same number as the first three Nanman generals who go into battle against Zhuge Liang’s forces, as they are given 50,000 troops each by Meng Huo. From that comparison Lady Zhurong is equal to the other male generals and her gender does not seem to have any impact on the evaluation of her predicted performance in battle. The spear that she wields is equal in length as Zhang Fei's spear, who is one of the most famous warriors in the story. It is the only two spears which are mentioned by length in the entire story, which emphasizes the strength and power the user must possess to be able to wield it. Especially since she is then compared to one of the most famous warriors of the story.

6.3.3. Differences compared to other Nanman generals
Comparing the differences between Lady Zhurong to the other Nanman generals, one aspect is that her track record and fate in the story differs. The first difference is that she has a better success rate than all of the Nanman generals, since most of them lost their first battle against Zhuge Liang’s forces. The celebratory feast that Meng Huo throws for her is the only one he holds after a victory on the battlefield. There are a few other Nanman generals who are also victorious, such as King Mulu who forces Zhuge Liang's army to retreat, but he does not capture anyone. Both King Duosi and King Mulu, who has a similar storyline as Lady Zhurong, are both killed in battle. In the end Lady Zhurong is instead captured and released in exchange for the generals that she captured.

The second difference is the way that Lady Zhurong and King Mulu are introduced. It is Lady Zhurong’s brother that tells Meng Huo in front of his assembly of 1000 men that they should ask for King Mulu’s assistance and vouches for his many talents. Comparing that to Lady Zhurong who volunteers herself. Besides that, when Lady Zhurong volunteers to fight she appears from behind a screen and has not participated in the conversation of the assembly prior to that. At the same time, her skills are instantly recognized, and Meng Huo is grateful to her for volunteering.

The third difference is that when Lady Zhurong volunteers to fight she heads straight into battle as she is described to directly mount a horse and lead the army. In comparison, for two other Nanman generals a banquet was held in their honor the evening before they set out to battle. In the case of King Mulu, it is him himself that indirectly asks for this celebration. However, one reason could be King Mulu’s status and that they have to undertake negotiations with him in order to get him to accept, which might imply that they had to hold the feast as part of their customs as a way of showing their gratitude. The banquet during the scene where Meng Huo gets tricked by Yang Feng and is captured is also in preparation the night before King Duosi was supposed to go out in battle.

The reason why no banquet is held for Lady Zhurong before she heads out in battle. One explanation could be that Zhuge Liang's army was in an encampment not far from them. If the reason could be to maintain an element of surprise or if there is another factor of urgency is unknown. At least in the case of the other generals they are able to take their time. It is only after Lady Zhurong has returned victorious that Meng Huo holds a banquet to celebrate her success. As pointed out this celebration is the first of its kind as she is the first general to win in battle and capture the enemy. At this point in the story Meng Huo has already been captured.
five out of his seven captures. During the dinner she participates and drinks together with the male generals. Both she and Meng Huo are described as laughing and drinking, which is similar to how the other generals were celebrated and interacted. Even though she is not male Lady Zhurong is able to participate in the celebrations with the rest and be part of this space, which is usually reserved for men only and possibly female entertainers. Instead, she can participate as a full worthy participant due to her status as a general.

The fourth difference is that Lady Zhurong only participates in battles until she is captured and released. The story does not convey why she was unable to fight again, or if she sustained any injuries, especially since she had won her first battle and would now be familiar with some of the officer’s tactics. But by not having her lead another army it can instead feature another Nanman general and their strategies and fighting styles. Comparing that to Zhuge Liang’s generals Zhang Ni and Ma Zhong who were captured and exchanged at the same time as Lady Zhurong, they participated in the next battle against King Mulu’s army.

The final difference is Meng Huo’s interactions with some of his other generals about strategies but not with Lady Zhurong. For example, with King Mulu they share strategies and discuss how to move in on Zhuge Liang’s troops. The dialogue is written out as dialogue with spoken lines in the story. This is something that Lady Zhurong lacks, as she is not part of a proper dialogue with any other character. Albeit it is worth pointing out that not all Nanman generals had these conversations with Meng Huo which would not count as Lady Zhurong being treated differently by default.

In summary, there are differences in how Lady Zhurong is portrayed compared to the male Nanman generals. Some parts of it can be explained by the small role of her character, and in sum the differences in how she is portrayed are relatively small and perhaps not significant enough to single out that it is based on her gender that she is portrayed or the way that she interacts or rather lacks interactions with other characters. In most ways she is depicted similar to male characters in that she interacts with men directly and appears in typical male spaces. The portrayal of her as being behind a screen and that she volunteers to fight by herself rather than that someone else vouches for her is the clearest difference between Lady Zhurong and male Nanman generals. Therefore, the expectations of her are at least initially not the same as for the male generals and she is not a natural member of the assembly. However, she does have more flexibility to move into the male space compared to female characters who are in the Han-
society. When she has moved into the space she is recognized as part of it, both from the Nanman and Han-generals alike.

6.3.4. Lady Zhurong’s interactions with Han-generals
Non-Nanman characters are treating Lady Zhurong the same way as other male generals. Once captured she is put together in the same place as the men. However, unlike Meng Huo she only shares a non-vocal conversation with Zhuge Liang. While we do not know Zhuge Liang’s opinion about her, one interpretation could be the inappropriateness of interacting with her from his position according to his customs. Similar to what Besio and Tung (2012) pointed out about Guan Yu. That he is portrayed almost sagely for his outwards disinterest in women which is why it could have been considered inappropriate for Zhuge Liang to have a longer interaction with her. Compared to villains such as Cao Cao who is a womanizer. If a character similar to him would have been in Zhuge Liang’s position, the interaction could have been different and perhaps remarks related to her gender would have been given. However, he does give her the same treatment as the male generals. Both when she is captured the first time and the second time when all of the remaining Nanman generals are captured they are all put together in the same place. While Lady Zhurong barely occurred in the chapter after she was returned, the author chose to put her name among the captured generals. Emphasizing that she ultimately is considered one of the Nanman generals.

On the battlefield one of Zhuge Liang’s generals marvels at Lady Zhurong presence but no one is remarking on her gender specifically. Comparing their reaction towards the other Nanman generals and their forces, they usually have more negative thoughts or attitudes towards their army. Such as Wutugu’s forces, which are described as so repulsive that they hardly seemed human. Instead, Lady Zhurong and her one-on-one fights are the main focus point of her battles. Except that her army successfully captures Ma Zhong, nothing is written or specifically attributed to her forces from their perspective.

6.4. Emasculation

There are many similarities between Lady Zhurong and Altenburg’s (2009) research about the female knight-errant and how that type of character often is used to emasculate and criticize
the male characters by being a moral mirror. Altenburg did differentiate the female knight-errant trope from the female general trope, which he concluded were not used in the same way. Lady Zhurong is depicted as someone that according to the writer of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is from a backwards place. To some extent her participation and rise to action comes during a time when Meng Huo has already been humiliated by being captured and released five times by Zhuge Liang’s troops. In addition, her introduction emphasizes the failure of one of her male counterparts as she is introduced laughing at him and emphasizing that she, *a woman*, can do the job better. The statement itself could be considered an emasculation of the deceased King Duosi. Thus, Lady Zhurong is from the beginning very clearly gendered by her own statement; emphasizing that she is a woman. She could also be seen as distancing herself by declaring herself a woman and expressing the difference between her and King Duosi. At the same time, the line could be considered a method for the writer to emphasize and remind the readers of her gender. Noteworthy is that this line is Lady Zhurong’s only spoken line in the story. In other parts she is described as crying out or agreeing with others, but this is the only line that is written out.

Nevertheless, as seen in the comparing part of the analysis, Lady Zhurong is portrayed similarly to how male generals are portrayed in the story. There is no doubt in her skills or malicious considerations of the impact of her gender in her portrayal as such. Instead, Meng Huo acknowledges her talent immediately and thanks her for volunteering to fight. As pointed out in the empirical part of this thesis, the spear that she wields is even the same size as one of the most famous warriors in the story. Since Zhang Fei is known to use that weapon, it emphasizes the power that Lady Zhurong also has to be able to wield it well. If her mere existence as a character would be in order to emasculate that could then be interpreted as criticizing Zhang Fei by extension. Instead, his use of a long spear and the transition of the story line to the younger generations of generals in the later part of the book is symbolized by his son Zhang Bao wielding the very same spear. Having Lady Zhurong wielding a weapon of the exact same iconic size instead should be interpreted as a recognition of her strength. Especially combined with the characteristics of her ancestry stemming from the fire god Zhurong as well as her performance. Combined she is instead depicted as a powerful opponent. If her character were merely to be used as a tool of emasculation she could have been depicted exactly as the other male generals without these specific traits and strength. Or alternatively she could have maintained a more typical female portrayal, emphasizing the differences. The trope that she stems from a lineage of the fire god is thus similar to what Altenburg (2009) pointed out about
female generals being part of a family of generals, which she additionally is with her relationship with Meng Huo. Instead, the different traits to emphasize her strength could be interpreted as a method for the author to emphasize the might of Lady Zhurong in order to ensure that the reader does not write her off as a weak opponent or in any way less worthy, due to her gender.

Finally, Lady Zhurong is successful during her first battle, and gets celebrated. She also fights off the other generals in the following days. Since she does outperform the other Nanman generals, it could be seen interpreted as that she is emasculating them. With the portrayal that the strongest general among the Nanman is a woman. However, since she captured two of Zhuge Liang’s generals, that interpretation would imply that she emasculated them as well, and by extension Zhuge Liang who had the generals leading his army. Making the application of the trope less likely. Instead, Lady Zhurong is portrayed as a powerful opponent as established above and is equal in terms of leading the same number of warriors into battle. While she is a novelty in the story, which also reflects that one of Zhuge Liang’s generals marvels at her, she mostly gets to exist as a general first, rather than as a woman.

Worth having in mind is that, according to Altenburg (2009), the moral mirror trope was more common in the late Ming-dynasty and Qing-dynasty, and thus it could be that the trope was not popularized yet. Therefore, while her spoken line does suggest an element of emasculation, writing-off Lady Zhurong’s character as merely emasculating, and a moral mirror of Meng Huo and the other generals is unlikely and would be a too simplified view of her character and role in the story.

6.5. Influence and significance

The actual influence that Lady Zhurong has is debatable. As a minor antagonist she has a limited space to act and impact the outcome of the story. The extent of Lady Zhurong’s influence during Meng Huo’s assembly of advisors is not something that the chapter conveys. Instead, she is portrayed as someone who comes forth from behind a screen, suggesting that she is limited to listening in rather than normally being an active participant in the discussion. This could suggest that she is not able to participate, perhaps due to her being a woman, similar to the gender roles of the Han-society and how Lady Cai eavesdrops but cannot participate in the conversations.
However, Lady Zhurong seems to have a say in some questions. One example is when she orders the execution of the captured enemy generals Zhang Ni and Ma Zhong. Meng Huo then decides not to execute them since Zhuge Liang’s army has spared him several times. Lady Zhurong is described as agreeing with him, which indicates that her opinion does matter, but it is unclear if she could have disagreed or advised Meng Huo to make another decision. Instead, characters such as Meng Huo’s younger brother Meng You or the younger brother of Lady Zhurong, plays a more prominent role engaging in diplomacy between the other Nanman tribes, interacting with Zhuge Liang and advising Meng Huo strategically. Lady Zhurong’s brother’s position and influence is likely due to his role as the King of the Dailai tribe, a title that is likely inherited by him and not his sister Lady Zhurong. If it is the case, it does fit well with the norms of a patriarchal society that is not unlike the majority society in China of the time.

Finally, in her role as a general Lady Zhurong has agency. She is able to decide for herself that she can volunteer to lead an army. As well as agency especially on the battlefield where she is able to command her army of 50,000 warriors. She makes an impact in delaying Zhuge Liang’s army in the conquering of Nanzhong. Her victory during her first battle also demonstrates the skill of the Nanman, which is the only major victory where Zhuge Liang’s generals are captured. In the end, her achievement in battle only temporarily slows down Zhuge Liang’s conquest and she is not able to turn around the fate of her people. However, her significance as a character does demonstrate that there were strong generals among the Nanman as well and that they were not all completely outmaneuvered by Zhuge Liang instantly.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, Lady Zhurong’s ethnicity intersects with her gender and creates a leeway that enabled her to master martial arts and use them practically as a general leading an army. Similar to the leeway that Li (2014) concluded that Hua Mulan had. As the societal expectations of her differ from women who are not Nanman, enabling her to volunteer to lead an army in battle because of her circumstances. Whereas no other woman does so in the story. At the same time, the implications of Lady Zhurong’s ethnicity are two-fold as her existence should be regarded from the world view of the Nanman shown in the novel. As discussed in the analysis it is hard to separate her from the depiction of the many unconventional ways that the Nanman waged war and the negative perception that the Han-Chinese society had of them; In one battle wild animals are used and in the next a woman is leading the army.
As was established in the Aim section of this thesis: By investigating Lady Zhurong and her portrayal it enables questioning the notion of lack of agency among the female characters of the story. In the case of Lady Zhurong, the clear findings are that she does have agency and albeit she is a minor character, she does have an impact on the Nanman story arc. Offering to lead an army into battle and fighting her first battle victoriously. It is important to underline the findings that Lady Zhurong’s portrayal does not differ greatly from how similar male generals are portrayed. Once she has volunteered to lead an army her gender does not seem to have an impact on the expectations of her, her performance on the battlefield, or the treatment of her. Both from other Nanman or by her captures who are Han-Chinese. Based on those findings it is clear that by the way that Lady Zhurong is portrayed as a strong opponent she should not be interpreted as merely an emasculation of the Nanman or a moral mirror. Further research could be conducted comparing the portrayal to other female generals in other stories in order to investigate if there are any differences in their portrayal. Nevertheless, the analysis and interpretation of the portrayal of her character, adds a dimension and expands our understanding of the view of women in traditional Chinese society.

Lady Zhurong’s presence and wider impact on the story as a whole is limited as she only has one spoken line, only is part of one chapter, and is not part of any dialogue with any of the characters. One caveat with choosing Lady Zhurong as the object for analysis is that if she had been a larger character, it would be easier to conclude more details about her and study the nuances of her interactions with the other characters. That would clarify if the other characters on the contrary have any different views or opinions of her or would treat her differently in any way. Especially among the Han-characters since the gender roles in their society differs. Albeit The Romance of the Three Kingdoms does not include any comments from other characters about her or emphasize her gender during her interactions with others. If they were included Lady Zhurong’s manner of speaking and interactions with others would also have been a possible object of analysis. Since she is the only female general and that she is only part of a short story arc, that perhaps captures the role that a female general could play at this point in history.

As discussed in the Theory section, this thesis has limits. Even though the analysis of the character Lady Zhurong based on feminist literary criticism and an intersectional analysis is only one possible interpretation, it fills a research gap by examining a unique case of a female general in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, combined with research through an
intersectional lens which may shine a light on her ethnic background and the view of the Nanman from the perspective of the late Yuan and Ming-society authors.

Finally, Lady Zhurong’s existence as a character is by itself intriguing since she is not based on a historical person. Her story is intentionally put into the novel. Perhaps it was easier for the writer to create a fictional female general among the Nanman as their customs were not as well-known rather than a general related to a famous character or faction in the story. Answering for an instance why her character was created and if there is any historical female general that was the inspiration for her character could be an area for continued research. Another continuation of the research could be to make a deep dive into the Nanman and examine why they are depicted in such a way, as well as the historical reasons behind their depiction. While The Romance of The Three Kingdoms follows historical events that occurred almost two thousand years ago, it keeps drawing an interest with many more aspects yet to be researched. The author of this thesis hopes that the thesis may inspire more research about female characters, and especially about women in non-traditional spaces.
8. References


