Murong De

Murong De, courtesy name Xuanming, was the youngest son of Huang. His mother, Lady Gongsun, dreamed of the sun entering her navel and gave birth to De while taking a daytime nap. Before reaching the age of twenty, he was already eight chi and two cun tall, with an imposing appearance and distinctive facial features including a prominent forehead marked with sun and moon patterns. He was widely read in various texts, possessed a careful and prudent nature, and was talented in many arts.

When Murong Jun usurped the throne, De was enfeoffed as Duke of Liang and served successively as Inspector of Youzhou and General of the Left Guard. When Wei inherited the throne, De was promoted to Prince of Fanyang, and gradually advanced to become Minister of Wei and Cavalier Attendant-in-Ordinary. Soon after, Fu Jian's general Fu Shuang rebelled and occupied Shaan, while his general Fu Liu raised troops in Fuhan to support him. De urged Wei to seize this opportunity to attack Fu Jian, presenting his argument with passionate rhetoric. Those with insight recognized his strategic foresight, but Wei ultimately failed to heed his advice. De's elder brother Chui greatly admired him, and they often discussed major military and state affairs together, always speaking with utmost sincerity. Chui said to him, "Your wisdom and understanding have greatly advanced; you are no longer like Wuxia Ameng[[1]](#footnote-0)."

During the Battle of Fangtou, De served as General Who Conquers the South alongside Chui and defeated the Jin forces. When Chui later fled to Fu Jian, De was dismissed from his position. After Wei's defeat, De was relocated to Chang'an, where Fu Jian appointed him as Governor of Zhangye, but he was released and allowed to return home after several years.

When Fu Jian's forces approached the river, De was appointed General Who Displays Valor. After Jian's defeat, when Jian became separated from Lady Zhang, Murong Wei intended to escort and protect her. De sternly addressed Wei, saying: "In the past, when Duke Zhuang of Chu destroyed Chen, he accepted Wu Chen's remonstrance and abandoned Consort Xia[[2]](#footnote-1). This woman is an ill-omened person who bewilders rulers. Military affairs should not be mixed with women's matters - Qin's defeat must have stemmed from this. We should avert our eyes and pass by; why should we escort her?" Wei did not comply, and De galloped away on horseback. Upon returning to Xingyang, he spoke to Wei: "In ancient times, Gou Jian took refuge in Kuaiji but eventually conquered Wu.[[3]](#footnote-2) The wise act according to timing, succeeding in all their endeavors. Heaven seems to be reversing Qin's fortune, causing their army's defeat. We should take advantage of their weakness to restore our state." Wei rejected this advice as well. De then followed Murong Chui to Ye.

When Murong Chui proclaimed himself King of Yan, he appointed De as Grand General of Chariots and Cavalry, restored his title as Prince of Fanyang, and placed him in charge of central defense and administration. After some time, he was promoted to Minister of Education. At that time, Murong Yong occupied Changzi with an army of 100,000, and Chui considered attacking him. While all officials expressed doubt, De advanced and said: "Our three ancestors accumulated virtue, their legacy still rings in our ears. Thus, Your Majesty's rise to power came without scheming, though it stemmed from your sacred martial prowess, it also relied on old loyalties - the men of Yan and Zhao gladly serve as Yan's subjects. Now Yong has established a false title and is stirring up both Chinese and barbarians, causing rebellious servants to run rampant in the struggle for power. We should eliminate him first to unify the people. In the past, Emperor Guangwu rushed to address Su Mao's rebellion without regard for his officials' exhaustion - was this due to lack of benevolence? No, it was because the situation was urgent. Military texts speak of using force only when unavoidable - can Your Majesty avoid it now?"

Chui smiled and told his followers: "The Minister's view matches mine. When two people are of one mind, their purpose can cut through metal. My decision is made." He then followed De's advice.

When Chui was near death, he entrusted the city of Ye to De through his son Bao. After Bao succeeded to the throne, he appointed De as Envoy with Credentials, Commander-in-Chief of Military Affairs of Jizhou, Yanzhou, Qingzhou, Xuzhou, Jingzhou, and Yuzhou, Special Advanced, Grand General of Chariots and Cavalry, Governor of Jizhou, and Chief Commandant of Southern Barbarians. He was stationed in Ye, abolished the Branch Department of State Affairs, and was given full authority over the southern territories.

When the Wei general Tuoba Zhang attacked Ye, De dispatched Prince Murong Qing of Nan'an and others to launch a night attack, defeating them. The Wei forces retreated to Xincheng, and Qing and others requested to attack them. Assistant Prefect Han Yanzhuo stepped forward and said: "The ancients first determined victory in the temple hall before engaging in battle. Now, there are four reasons why Wei cannot be attacked, and three reasons why Yan should not move. First, Wei's army has come from afar and excels in open warfare - they cannot be attacked. Second, they have penetrated deep into our territory and are positioned in desperate ground - they cannot be attacked. Third, though their vanguard was defeated, their rear ranks remain solid - they cannot be attacked. Fourth, they outnumber us - they cannot be attacked.

As for our forces: first, we are fighting on our own territory - we should not move. Second, if we move and fail to achieve victory, the people's morale will be difficult to maintain - we should not move. Third, our city walls are not yet repaired and we lack preparations against the enemy - we should not move. These are all situations that military strategists warn against.

We should instead dig deep trenches and build high ramparts, using our rest to await their exhaustion. With their supply lines stretching a thousand li and no provisions to forage, their army will soon lack resources. If they attack, many will perish. As their forces tire and weaknesses emerge, we can plan carefully and achieve victory."

De said: "Han's words are the strategy of Zhang Liang and Chen Ping." He then recalled Qing's forces.

When Wei again sent Helailuo, Duke of Liaoxi, to join Zhang in besieging Ye, De dispatched his staff officer Liu Zao to request aid from Yao Xing, addressing him as both uncle and elder brother, but Yao's forces never arrived, greatly frightening the people. De personally hosted a feast for his soldiers and showed them great care, moving them with his kindness so that all were willing to die for the cause. Soon after, Zhang and Lu fell into internal discord and each secretly withdrew their forces. Zhang's Marshal Ding Jian led his troops to surrender, reporting that Zhang's army was exhausted and could be defeated. De sent commanders to pursue and rout Zhang's forces, finally stabilizing public morale.

At this time, Wei forces entered Zhongshan, causing Murong Bao to flee to Ji, while Murong Xiang usurped the throne. When Liu Zao returned from Yao Xing, Yao's Grand Astrologer Gao Lu sent his nephew Wang Jinghui with Zao to deliver an imperial seal along with a cryptic text that read: "Those with virtue (De) shall prosper, those without shall perish. De receives Heaven's Mandate, soft yet returning to strength." There was also a prophecy that said: "Great winds rise stirring dust and sand, Eight Wells and Three Blades shall finally stand, Four Seas boil as Zhongshan falls to hand, Only the virtuous one shall command Three Platforms grand." De's officials then discussed how Murong Xiang had usurped the throne in Zhongshan, Wei forces were powerful in Jizhou, and Bao's fate was uncertain, thus urging De to assume the imperial title. De refused. When Murong Da fled from Longcheng to Ye, reporting that Bao was still alive, the discussions ceased. Soon after, Bao appointed De as Chancellor and Governor of Jizhou, with authority over the southern territories by imperial mandate.

De's nephew Murong Lin fled from Yitai to Ye and advised De: "Now that Zhongshan has fallen, Wei will surely press their advantage to attack Ye. Although we have stored provisions, the city is too large to defend effectively, and people's morale is low - we cannot fight. Before Wei's forces arrive, we should lead our people south across the river to join Prince He of Luyang, occupy Huatai to gather troops and grain, and wait for an opportunity to act - this is the best strategy. Though Wei has taken Zhongshan, they cannot stay long and will likely just plunder and return. People are reluctant to relocate, and circumstances will naturally create changes. We can then display our might to support them. Wei will face enemies both internal and external, giving nostalgic soldiers something to rely on. By extending grace and trust, we can gather the scattered people and take everything in one move."

Earlier, Murong He had also urged De to move south, so De agreed. In the second year of Long'an (398), he led 40,000 households with 27,000 carriages from Ye, intending to relocate to Huatai. They encountered strong winds and some boats sank. As Wei forces approached, the people grew fearful and discussed retreating to Liyang. That evening, the floating ice froze solid, allowing them to cross that night. By dawn when Wei forces arrived, the ice had melted, as if by divine intervention. They renamed Liyang Ford to Heavenly Bridge Ford. Upon reaching Huatai, an auspicious star appeared in the Tail and Winnowing Basket constellations. A white jade resembling a seal was found in the Zhang River.

Following Former Yan precedent, De declared it the first year of his reign, issued a general amnesty for all but capital offenses, and established government offices. He appointed Murong Lin as Minister of Works and Director of the Imperial Secretariat, Murong Fa as General of the Central Army, Muyu Ba as Left Vice Director of the Imperial Secretariat, Ding Tong as Right Vice Director of the Imperial Secretariat, and made other appointments accordingly. Earlier, a unicorn (Lin) had appeared in Hejian, which Murong Lin took as an auspicious sign for himself. At this time, he secretly plotted rebellion, but was discovered and forced to commit suicide. That summer, the Wei general Helailu led his forces to join De.

At this time, Murong Bao fled south from Longcheng to Liyang and sent his Palace Attendant Zhao Si to summon Murong Zhong to welcome him. Zhong, who had originally led the proposal for De to assume the imperial title, was displeased upon hearing this news, imprisoned Si, and quickly reported the situation. De addressed his subordinates, saying: "Previously, you urged me to act as regent for the sake of the state. I also considered that since the legitimate emperor had fled and both gods and men lacked a ruler, I would temporarily comply with the general consensus to maintain people's hopes. Now that Heaven seems to be reversing our misfortunes and the legitimate emperor has returned, I shall prepare a carriage to welcome him, apologize for my offenses at court, and then retire to private life wearing a commoner's headpiece. What do you think of this?"

His Palace Attendant Zhang Hua stepped forward and said: "In an age of contention, only the mighty can prevail; in times of political intrigue, how can the weak survive! If Your Majesty follows the benevolence of a common woman and abandons the enterprise granted by Heaven, once your authority is gone, even your life won't be secure. How can there be any talk of yielding?"

De replied: "I have considered how the ancients would seize power contrary to proper order but maintain it in accordance with it, yet this principle seems insufficient. That is why I hesitate and remain undecided."

Muyu Hu requested to ride out and verify Bao's situation. De shed tears as he sent him. He then led several hundred warriors to follow Si northward, planning to kill Bao. Earlier, after sending Si, Bao had learned of De's assumption of power and fled north in fear. When Hu arrived, he found nothing, captured Si, and returned. De, noting Si's familiarity with precedents and protocols, intended to employ him. Si said: "In the past, even Guan Yu, though highly regarded by Cao Cao, did not forget his loyalty to his original lord. Though I am a mere criminal of low status who has received the state's grace, even dogs and horses have feelings - how much more so humans! I beg to return to my sovereign to demonstrate my humble loyalty." Though De tried to keep him, Si angrily said: "When the Zhou house declined, Jin and Zheng provided support; when Han faced the Seven Kingdoms' rebellion, it was truly saved by the Prince of Liang. Your Highness is the uncle by relation and holds the highest position in court. Yet you cannot lead the other nobles in supporting the royal house, and instead take advantage of its decline to act like Zhao Lun. Although I may not achieve the effect of Shen Xu weeping for Qin, I would rather be like Jun Bin who refused to serve Wang Mang's usurping regime." De became angry and had him executed.

The Jin Governor of Nanyang, Lüqiu Xian, and General of Peaceful Northern Regions, Deng Qifang, led an army of 20,000 to attack, stationing their forces at Guancheng. De dispatched his Central Army Commander Murong Fa and Pacification General Murong He and others to resist them, and the imperial forces were defeated. De was angry that Fa did not pursue the Jin army to the end, and executed his Pacification Army Commander Jin Gui.

Earlier, after Fu Deng was destroyed by Yao Xing, Deng's brother Fu Guang led his people to surrender to De. He was appointed Champion General and stationed at Qihuo Fort. When Mars was observed in the Eastern Well constellation, some said this meant Qin would rise again. Guang then declared himself King of Qin and defeated De's general Murong Zhong. At this time, De had just established his capital at Huatai, situated between Jin and Wei, with less than ten cities and only tens of thousands of people. After Zhong's defeat, many potential rebels went over to Guang's side. De then left Murong He to guard Huatai while personally leading troops to attack Guang, and executed him.

Initially, when Bao arrived at Liyang, He's Chief Clerk Li Bian urged He to accept him, but He refused. Fearing his plot would be exposed, Bian led Jin forces to Guancheng, hoping De would personally lead troops, allowing him to create chaos afterwards. When De didn't come out, Bian became increasingly uneasy. During De's campaign, Bian again urged He to rebel, but He refused. Enraged, Bian killed He and surrendered Huatai to Wei. At this time, all the soldiers' families were inside the city. When De planned to attack, Han Fan advised him: "Wei forces have entered the city and seized our resources. The situation between host and guest has completely reversed. With people's hearts in danger, we cannot fight. We should first secure another region as a foundation for controlling Guanzhong, then gather strength to plan further - this is the best strategy." De then stopped.

De's Right Guard General Murong Yun executed Li Bian and led over 20,000 soldiers and their families out of the city, bringing great joy to the army. De consulted his officials, saying: "Although Fu Guang has been defeated, we've lost our base at the Pacification Army. Advancing means facing strong enemies, retreating leaves us with nowhere to rely on. What should we do?"

Zhang Hua suggested: "Pengcheng is protected by mountains and rivers, the former capital of Chu. Its terrain is defensible and population abundant. We can attack and occupy it as our base."

Murong Zhong, Muyu Hu, Feng Cheng, Han Yanzhuo and others strongly advocated attacking Huatai. Pan Cong said: "Huatai's location, accessible from all directions, is not suitable for an imperial capital. Moreover, it connects to Great Wei in the north and strong Qin in the west - we cannot rest easy with these two states as neighbors. Pengcheng has sparse population across vast lands, flat terrain with no natural defenses, and is a Jin garrison that will surely resist our forces. It's also close to the Yangtze and Huai rivers, with navigable waterways that flood extensively in summer and autumn, turning thousand-li areas into lakes. Furthermore, naval warfare is our weakness but Wu's strength. Even if we take it now, it's not a long-term solution.

The fertile lands of Qing and Qi, known as Eastern Qin, span 2,000 li with over 100,000 households. With natural defenses on all sides and the abundance of the sea at its back, it's truly a land suited for military endeavors. The heroes of the Three Qi regions are storing up their ambitions and waiting - who among them wouldn't wish to serve a bright ruler to establish even the smallest achievement! Guanggu, built by Cao Yi, has steep mountains and rivers, making it suitable for an imperial capital. We should send eloquent envoys to persuade them first, followed by our main army. Lü Hun, who previously betrayed the state's trust, will surely switch allegiance. If they remain stubborn and disobedient, our army's presence will naturally cause them to crumble. After securing the area, we can close our borders, nurture our forces, and wait for opportunities to act - this would be like the Two Han dynasties having Guanzhong and Henei."

De remained undecided. The monk Lang Gong was known for his skill in divination, so De consulted him about where to go. Lang said: "Having respectfully considered the three proposals, Minister Pan's suggestion truly represents a strategy for national prosperity. At the beginning of this year, a long star rose from Kui and Lou constellations, sweeping through Xu and Wei - and Xu and Wei are in Qi's celestial field, symbolizing the removal of the old and establishment of the new. We should first pacify old Lu, patrol Langye, and wait for the autumn winds to signal the season before surrounding Linqi from the north - this is the way of Heaven."

De was greatly pleased and led his army south. All the counties in northern Yanzhou surrendered, and he appointed officials to govern them. He showed concern for the elderly, prevented his army from private plundering, and the common people were so content that they brought cattle and wine to line the roads.

De sent envoys to persuade Qi Commandery's Governor Bilü Hun, but Hun refused. De then dispatched Murong Zhong to lead 20,000 infantry and cavalry to attack him. De advanced to occupy Langye, where over 100,000 people from Xu and Yan territories submitted to him. From Langye northward, over 40,000 people came to welcome him. De then attacked Ju city, whose defending commander Ren An abandoned the city and fled. Pan Cong was appointed to govern Ju city.

Zhong sent proclamations to all commanderies in Qingzhou, stating: "Rise and fall have their seasons, as principles have long shown. Difficulties give birth to sages, as recorded in the central registers. Thus King Xuan rose like a dragon to save the imperiled Zhou, and Guangwu emerged like a phoenix to restore the fallen Han - these were destined periods of imperial rise and fall. Since our Yongkang era's troubles began, great whales escaped the net, China split into four, and common people scattered in five directions. The rebel Bilü Hun's father Wei, who once joined Duan Kan in causing chaos in Zichuan, was eliminated when the Grand Minister campaigned east. Hun, surviving under the collapsed nest, was shown mercy like an unbroken egg. Yet lacking even a dog or horse's gratitude for being raised, he inherited his evil father's destructive ambitions, stealing Eastern Qin, allying with Wu and Yue, exploiting the common people, and sending tribute to the Southern Seas.

His Majesty has answered the call of destiny, gathering great authority once again. Taking pity on Yingqiu, which temporarily blocks the royal strategy, he leads 200,000 troops from seven provinces to inspect and forgive clans, and question the crimes of Qi and Lu. In the past, Han Xin conquered Qi as a mere general without fighting; Geng Yan subdued Bu with a partial army in less than a month. How much more certain is victory when using the force of ten thousand chariots to sweep away rebels in one corner - like crushing eggs against a mountain, the outcome is clear. Though unworthy, I humbly lead the vanguard, commanding 120,000 elite troops, including Wuhuan cavalry and fierce warriors from the Three He regions, whose swords compete with evening flames for brightness, and whose halberds rival the autumn moon in brilliance. With such forces attacking cities, what city cannot be taken? With such troops in battle, what enemy cannot be subdued?

In the past, Dou Rong surrendered Hexi to Han and brought glory to his descendants; Peng Chong rebelled in Yuyang and died at the hands of his servants. Recently, Cao Yi's arrogance led to his capture by Later Zhao; Duan Kan's defiance brought destruction from the previous dynasty. Are these not examples of fortune and misfortune, success and failure throughout history?

If Hun awakens from his delusion, he will receive honor and favor. But if he dares resist the royal army, his defeat will be complete with no remnants. To the heroes of Jixia and warriors north of Mount Dai: whoever can behead and deliver Hun will be rewarded as one who assisted in establishing the dynasty. If this opportunity is missed, both jade and stone will be crushed alike."

When Hun heard De's army was approaching, he led over 8,000 households into Guanggu. All commanderies surrendered to De upon receiving the proclamation. Hun, frightened, attempted to flee to Wei with his family. De sent Archery Commander Liu Gang to pursue and execute him at Ju city. Hun's Staff Officer Zhang Ying, who had often written provocative proclamations for Hun, was captured and questioned by De. Zhang remained composed and slowly replied: "My serving Hun was like Kuai Tong serving Han Xin. Tong met the Han founder and received mercy, while I meet Your Majesty and face execution - compared to the ancients, I consider myself unfortunate. I willingly accept the punishment of Fangfeng, but I only fear that the civilizing influence of Yao and Shun has not yet spread throughout the four seas." De initially appreciated his words but ultimately executed him. De then entered Guanggu.

In the fourth year [of Long’an] (400), he usurped the imperial throne at the southern suburbs, declared a general amnesty, and changed the era name to Jianping. He established temporary ancestral temples south of the palace and sent envoys to announce his accession with imperial credentials. He promoted Murong Zhong to Minister of Education, Murong Ba to Minister of Works, Feng Fu to Left Vice Director of the Imperial Secretariat, and Muyu Hu to Right Vice Director of the Imperial Secretariat. He sent his Minister of Finance Feng Kai and Palace Attendant Feng Cheng to inspect local customs and hold grand feasts for officers and soldiers everywhere. He made his wife Lady Duan the Empress. He established educational institutions and selected 200 students for the Imperial Academy from among the sons of officials ranging from ministers down to second-rank officials.

Later, while feasting with his ministers and becoming tipsy with wine, he smiled and said: "Although I am inadequate, I humbly face south and receive the feudal lords. I am not arrogant in my position and remain vigilant day and night - to which ruler from antiquity can I be compared?"

His Inspector of Qingzhou, Ju Zhong, replied: "Your Majesty is a sage of restoration, comparable to Shaokang and Guangwu." De ordered his attendants to reward Zhong with a thousand rolls of silk. When Zhong modestly declined the excessive reward, De said: "You know how to flatter me, but don't you think I know how to flatter you? Your response was insincere flattery, so I likewise rewarded you with empty gestures. When the reward is not genuinely given, what is there to thank for?"

Han Fan stepped forward and said: "I have heard that an emperor should not speak in jest, and loyal ministers should not give false responses. Today's exchange was mutual deception between ruler and subject - truly both sovereign and minister have failed in their duties." De was greatly pleased and rewarded Fan with fifty rolls of fine silk. From then on, forthright speech flourished, and the court became filled with honest officials.

De's mother and elder brother were previously in Chang'an. He sent Du Hong, a man from Pingyuan, to Chang'an to inquire about their welfare. Hong said: "If I reach Chang'an and cannot bring back news of the Empress Dowager's situation, I will continue west to Zhangye and prove my loyalty with my death. My father Xiong is over sixty years old and has never enjoyed official honors. I request a position in our home county to fulfill my filial duties."

Zhang Hua stepped forward and said: "Du Hong asks for rewards before even setting out on his mission. His desire for profit runs deep - he cannot be trusted."

De replied: "I am willing to give away what I consider trivial wealth to attract those who would risk death for me. How could I be stingy when it concerns honoring parents? Moreover, Hong seeks to serve his ruler by finding my relatives and seeks a position for his father - though it may appear self-serving on the surface, it truly demonstrates loyalty and filial piety within." He then appointed Xiong as the Magistrate of Pingyuan.

When Hong reached Zhangye, he was killed by bandits. Upon hearing this, De grieved and provided generous support to Hong's wife and children.

The following year, De visited Qi city and climbed Yingqiu. Looking at Yan Ying's tomb, he remarked to his attendants: "According to ritual, high officials should not be buried near city walls. Pingzhong (Yan Ying) was a worthy man of antiquity who understood ritual, yet he lived near the market in life and was buried near the city in death - was there meaning in this?"

The Qingzhou scholar Yan Mo replied: "Confucius praised my ancestor Pingzhong as worthy, so worthy he certainly was. Did he not know how to build high bridges and observe elaborate rituals? But since he managed affairs from his household, he practiced frugality to correct the customs of his time. Living in a cramped dwelling in life, how could he choose an elaborate burial site in death? The reason he was buried near the gate was perhaps to remind people of his life's principles."

De then took Mo with him to visit the temple of King Yang of Han in Chengyang. He feasted the elderly at Shen Pool, climbed Mount Sheshou in the north, and gazed east toward Dingzu. Looking at Mount Niu, he sighed: "No one from ancient times escaped death!" He was moved with thoughts of mortality. He then asked Mo about Qi's mountains, rivers, hills, and historical stories of its worthy men. Mo responded in detail, drawing maps on the ground. De was deeply impressed and appointed him as a Gentleman of the Imperial Secretariat. He established iron foundries at Mount Shang and set up salt offices at Wuchang Marsh to increase resources for military and state use.

De's former official Zhao Rong arrived from Chang'an, bringing for the first time detailed news of his mother and elder brother's deaths. De wailed in grief until he coughed up blood, and subsequently fell ill. Taking advantage of this situation, his Chief Commandant of Police Murong Da plotted rebellion. He sent Palace Guard Huang Qiu to lead troops in attacking the Duan Gate, while Palace Guard Commander Hou Chimei opened the gate to assist them. The Palace Attendant Xun helped De escape by climbing over the city wall, and they hid in Xun's residence. When Duan Hong and others heard of the palace uprising, they stationed troops at all four gates. De returned to the palace, executed Chimei and others, while Da fled in fear to Wei. Later, Murong Fa engaged the Wei forces in battle at Biaoyu in Jibei, where the Wei forces were defeated.

His Secretary Han Yanzhuo submitted a memorial saying:

"Two rebels have escaped punishment and our national shame remains unwashed. The area west of the passes has become a den of wolves, and Yang-Yue has become a forest of owls. The imperial capitals' altars have been reduced to ruins, and the ancestral tombs of four generations lie untended. Is this not a time for righteous men to sigh in anger and for heroes to sacrifice themselves?

Yet the imperial house faces many difficulties and our military might has not been restored, allowing the long serpent to remain uncut and the wild boar to rest. People harbor resentment, saying that one day's peace cannot last forever, and morning's ease brings worry by year's end.

Your Majesty's mission of restoration requires careful nurturing. You show mercy to those who lost their land, grant long exemptions from service, and pity the common people's need for rest, valuing gradual progress over disruption. While this may secure peace at Yingqiu, it is insufficient to manage affairs in Qin and Yue.

Now the rebellious groups have many followers, occupying three directions and watching for our weaknesses. We should carefully assess our strengths and weaknesses, evaluate success and failure, train soldiers, forge weapons, expand agriculture, store grain - advancing to avenge our shame and defeat rebels, retreating to secure our natural defenses.

Yet the common people, following the corrupt practices of Qin and Jin, secretly collude: hundreds of households combine registrations, thousands share a single census entry. They rely on city temples, unafraid of punishment, publicly avoiding duties and willfully engaging in crime. This damages customs and violates laws, but since it hasn't been publicly exposed, we cannot punish them.

We should now secretly investigate the common people and correct their registrations. This will demonstrate the court's clear governance and increase military resources. If you accept this advice, I hope it will benefit the empire. Even if I face punishment like Shang Yang or harm like Yue Yin, I will not decline."

De accepted this advice and sent his Cavalry General Murong Zhen with 3,000 horsemen to patrol the borders strictly and prevent people from fleeing.

Yanzhuo was appointed as Envoy with the Imperial Insignia Cavalier Attendant-in-Ordinary , and Acting Imperial Secretary. He inspected commanderies and counties to investigate hidden households, discovering 58,000 concealed households. Yanzhuo was honest and upright in his public duties. Wherever he made camp in the countryside, he did not disturb the local people.

De held a grand gathering of scholars and personally presided over their examinations. Afterwards, during a feast, he climbed to a high place to gaze into the distance. He turned to his Secretary Lu Sui and said: "Qi and Lu have always had many gentlemen. During their prosperous times, scholars like Jie, Shen, Basheng, Chunyu, Zou, and Tian would sit beneath shaded eaves, overlook clear ponds, ride in vermillion carriages, wear long swords, freely express bold words, and engage in soaring debates about heaven. With a mere gesture they could compose elegant prose, and their every movement created rhythmic verses. But today, only overgrown grass and crumbling tombs remain - their spirit has dispersed like smoke. Looking back over a thousand years, how can one not feel moved!"

Sui replied: "King Wu paid respects at Bi Gan's tomb, and Gaozu of Han made offerings at Xinling's grave - both showed concern for worthy men and remembered past events. Your Majesty's kindness extends to these two ancient rulers, your grace reaches to the nine springs below. If those ancient worthies had knowledge of this, would they not be deeply grateful?"

Previously, a bandit named Wang Shi had gathered followers at Mount Tai, declaring himself "Emperor of Great Peace." He named his father as Supreme Emperor, his elder brother as General Who Conquers the East, and his younger brother as General Who Conquers the West. Murong Zhen captured and executed him in the marketplace. Before his execution, someone asked about the whereabouts of his father and brothers. Shi replied: "The Supreme Emperor has fled into hiding, while the Generals of East and West were killed by rebel troops. Only I, the Emperor, remain alone and helpless."

His wife angrily rebuked him: "It was this mouth of yours that brought us to this end, yet you still speak this way!" Shi responded: "Empress! Since ancient times, has there ever been a family that didn't fall or a state that didn't perish?"

When the executioner struck him with the flat of the blade, he looked up and said: "Though I may fall, I will never give up my imperial title." When De heard of this, he smiled in derision.

At that time, Huan Xuan was planning to usurp the throne and was executing those who did not support him. The Inspector of Ji Province Liu Gui, the Administrator of Xiangcheng Sima Xiuzhi, the General Who Conquers the Barbarians Liu Jingxuan, the Chancellor of Guangling Gao Yazhi, and the Chief of Jiangdu Zhang Dan all felt unsafe and fled to De.

Then, De's Palace Attendant Han Fan submitted a memorial saying:

"The way of emperors must emphasize strategy. Having the right time but not the right person leads to incomplete achievements; having the right person but not the right time means ambitions cannot be fulfilled. Those who succeed in establishing royal authority do so only when both person and time align.

The Jin state has faced internal troubles for seven years now. Huan Xuan's treasonous usurpation exceeds even Dong Zhuo in cruelty. Heaven is angry and people resent him - his misfortunes have accumulated. There could be no better opportunity than this.

With Your Majesty's divine martial prowess directing affairs, leading eager troops to meet those weary of chaos - it would be like sound producing echo, form following shadow - nothing could be easier. Moreover, the households north and south of the Yangtze and Huai rivers are few, and both public and private cavalry number only a few hundred - their defenses are weak.

If we deploy ten thousand infantry and cavalry in a thunderous campaign, advancing swiftly toward Jiang and Hui, the grass will surely bend before our banners and wine will be offered along our path. We could control thousands of li of territory and gather over a hundred thousand troops - enough to unite with strong Qin in the west and resist great Wei in the north.

For expanding territory and securing the state altars, no time is better than now. If we miss this opportunity and heroes arise again to eliminate Huan Xuan and establish new rule, when far and near are pacified and none harbor other ambitions, not only will Jianye be difficult to capture, but the north of the Yangtze will also be beyond reach. When opportunities pass, problems arise and worry will surely come. If Heaven gives but we do not take, regret will follow. I hope Your Majesty will consider this."

De replied: "Recently, we have faced many difficulties and the great net of order has temporarily slackened, allowing traitors to bring chaos to China and leaving the old capital in ruins. Whenever I think of these unfortunate times, I feel both anger and sorrow. In the past, Shaokang restored the Xia dynasty to heaven's mandate with just a small force. How much more could I achieve, commanding the territory of the Three Qi and troops from five provinces, training them in military affairs and instructing them in propriety? Both rulers and subjects understand righteousness, people are eager to exert themselves, and we have long been preparing arms and waiting for opportunity. However, I wish to first stabilize the Central Plains and eliminate fugitive rebels, then spread pure customs and manage the Nine Provinces, water our horses at the Yangtze and hang our banners on the slopes of Longban. Since this ambition is not yet fulfilled, we must temporarily sheathe our weapons. Regarding the current situation, let the princes and ministers discuss it in detail."

Everyone felt that since Huan Xuan had just gained power, it was not yet time to act against him, so the plan was halted.

Then De held military exercises west of the city, with 370,000 infantry, 17,000 chariots, and 53,000 iron cavalry. They spread across mountains and marshes, their banners filling the landscape, the sound of gongs and drums shaking heaven and earth.

De climbed high to observe, then turned to Liu Gui and Gao Yazhi, saying: "In the past, Xi Ke avenged himself against Qi, and Wu Zixu took revenge on Chu. They both ultimately achieved their bold aspirations, their names flowing down through a thousand years. Since you gentlemen know to dedicate yourselves to a righteous cause, you should not shame these ancient examples."

Yazhi and the others kowtowed and replied: "We are fortunate to receive Your Majesty's heavenly protection and great grace. Our survival and continuation truly depends on this sacred time. Even if we die ten thousand deaths, how could we adequately repay you!"

Soon after, news came of Huan Xuan's defeat. De appointed Murong Zhen as vanguard and Murong Zhong as Grand Commander, assigning them 20,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry. Just as they were about to depart on schedule, De fell ill, and thus the military campaign was cancelled.

Earlier, De had sent for his nephew Chao from Chang'an, who arrived at this time. One night, De dreamed of his father saying: "Since you have no son, why haven't you established Chao as Crown Prince earlier? If you don't, evil people will harbor ambitions." Upon waking, he told his wife: "This was a divine instruction from the former emperor. Judging from this dream's meaning, I will die soon."

He then issued an edict establishing Chao as Crown Prince, declared a general amnesty throughout his domain, and granted two ranks of nobility to those who succeeded their fathers. He died that same month, which was the first year of Yixi (405). He was seventy years old at the time. More than ten coffins were prepared at night and sent out through the four gates, then secretly buried in mountain valleys, so that the location of his actual remains was never known. He had reigned for five years. He was posthumously titled Emperor Xianwu.

1. Wuxia Ameng refers to the young and inexperienced Lü Meng in Wuxia, implying that Murong De had matured beyond his youthful state. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Reference to historical event where Duke Zhuang of Chu heeded advice to abandon the beautiful but troublesome Consort Xia to focus on state affairs. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Refers to Gou Jian, King of Yue, who after being defeated by Wu, patiently rebuilt his strength and eventually conquered Wu. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)