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**From Family Crisis to State Crisis  
The Case of Former Yan (Qian Yan 前燕, 285/337–370),  
a Xianbei Conquest Dynasty**

Former Yan, a state in Northeast China was established by the Murong 慕容 tribe of the Xianbei 鮮卑, a partly nomadic people who had moved to the vicinity of the Chinese frontier in the 220s. The Murong gradually accommodated themselves to Chinese ways and having defeated their rivals along the frontier by the 340s, they became a major power in North China.<sup>1</sup> A decade later they destroyed Later Zhao (Hou Zhao 後趙, 319–351) – once the strongest one among the states north of the Yellow River – and their ruler assumed imperial dignity. By this time the Murong were close to becoming the masters of North China. Schreiber argues that one of the secrets of their success lay in the creation and operation of the Yan government as “a family affair”. Claiming that as a result of it Yan was a stable state, relatively void of internal turmoil and civil war.<sup>2</sup> However the “promise and potential” of the Murong “was abruptly cut short in 370 when it was conquered by the even more powerful Former Qin (Qian Qin 前秦, 351–394) Empire.”<sup>3</sup>

This paper argues that deteriorating family relations within the ruling elite – which despite dragging on for about two decades did not lead to serious armed conflict – did nonetheless play a major role in the gradual demise of the Murong’s state. Below I examine the causes of this deterioration and aim to shed light on the connections between the crisis it precipitated and earlier attempts to forestall such a crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> Holcombe 2013: 10–15.

<sup>2</sup> Schreiber 1956: 120.

<sup>3</sup> Holcombe (2013: 14) gives the dates of Former Qin’s existence as (351–384). This is an error that might have been caused by the notion that Former Qin’s fragmentation started in this year after its devastating defeat by the troops of the Eastern Jin dynasty (Dong Jin 東晉, 317–420). This fragmentation and Former Qin’s the subsequent struggle for survival lasted for another decade and came to its end only in 394.

### The Root of the Problem

The crisis of the Murong leadership started with a worsening relationship between two brothers, Murong Chui 慕容垂 (originally called Murong Ba 慕容霸) and Murong Jun 慕容俊/侁, sons of Murong Huang 慕容皝, the king (*wang* 王) of Yan, who died in 348. During the preceding decades the Murong had risen from a rather weak Xianbei tribe to become the most formidable power of Northeast China, and in this, Murong Chui played a huge part.

The *Jinshu* 晉書 records that during the reign of Murong Huang, Chui and his uncle, Murong Han 慕容翰 took part in a military expedition against Koguryeo in 342 and against a neighboring Xianbei tribe, the Yuwen 宇文 in 344. During these campaigns both Han and Chui are recorded to have fought on the front line. Both campaigns resulted in victory for the Murong. In the Koguryeo campaign they captured 50 000 people from Koguryeo, dug up the corpse of the king's father and took them along with the present king's still living mother to their capital at Longcheng 龍城 (today: Liaoning 辽宁, Chaoyang 朝阳 city). The Koguryeo king then sent his brother with presents to the Murong court and managed to retrieve his father's remains, but his mother was obliged to stay in Longcheng so as to ensure her son's obedience. The Yuwen were also utterly defeated. Their chief, Yuwen Yidougui 宇文逸豆歸 fled to the north and died a year later. His tribe was conquered and relocated near Changli 昌黎 (today: Liaoning, 辽宁, Chaoyang 朝阳 city).<sup>4</sup>

For his contribution in destroying the Yuwen, Chui was created the *Marquis of Duxiang* (Duxiang hou 都鄉侯), and later he was posted near the Tu 徒 river, which formed a border with the Murong's major rival, Later Zhao. Here he successfully prevented the Later Zhao general, Deng Heng 鄧恆 from launching a campaign comprising troops numbering several tens of thousands against Yan.<sup>5</sup>

Murong Huang had at least 19 sons and a daughter.<sup>6</sup> We know from our sources that he applauded his fifth son, Murong Chui's abilities, but in the end he designated his then eldest living son (second by birth), Murong Jun as his heir. When Huang died and Jun ascended the throne in 348, their western neighbor, Later Zhao was still posing a serious threat to Yan. Moreover, the founders of Yan's next major rival, Former Qin were still subjects of Later Zhao. In the followings I will argue that not only did Murong Huang's decision on the succession determined the future of his two sons Chui and Jun's relationship but, as a result of this also Yan's relationship with its rivals and ultimately its fate.

<sup>4</sup> JS 109.2822, 123.3077.

<sup>5</sup> JS 123.3077, ZZTJ 97.3069.

<sup>6</sup> We only know of one daughter, the one who married Tuoba Shiyijian 拓跋什翼犍, the last prince (*wang* 王) of the Tabgach Dai 代 (310–376) state, in 344.

Our sources provide very brief and somewhat different explanations about the circumstances of Huang's designation of his heir. The *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑 says the following:

“Initially the king of Yan, Huang, was amazed by Ba's (Chui's original name) talent. That is why he gave him the name Ba and was about to designate him as his heir. His ministers however admonished him and prevented [him from doing that]. Nonetheless he treated him more favorably than the heir apparent (Jun). Therefore Jun despised Ba.”<sup>7</sup>

初，燕王皝奇霸之才，故名之曰霸，將以為世子，群臣諫而止，然寵遇猶逾於世子。由是俊惡之。

The *Jinshu* on the other hand, does not state explicitly that Huang first wanted to designate Chui as heir, but still makes it clear that Chui was his favorite son:

“Murong Chui was Huang's fifth son and his courtesy name was Daoming. Already as a young boy he stood out by his talent and abilities. He stood seven feet and seven inches tall, and his arms hung below his knees. Huang was very much fond of him and often turned to his younger brothers saying: ‘This boy with his broad mind and curiosity will ultimately be able to defeat others or become a great person. Therefore he gave him the name Ba and the courtesy name Daoye and favored him over the heir, Jun. Because of this, Jun could not live in peace with him.’”<sup>8</sup>

慕容垂，字道明，皝之第五子也。少岐嶷有器度，身長七尺七寸，手垂過膝。皝甚寵之，常目而謂諸弟曰：此兒闊達好奇，終能破人家，或能成人家。故名霸，字道業，恩遇逾於世子俊，故俊不能平之。

Chui's original name, Ba 霸 meaning “first among the princes” clearly indicates Huang's partiality towards him. The depictions of Chui's appearance and physical prowess in the chronicles are also telling. A number of other prominent figures from the era are recorded to possess similar superb physical characteristics as Chui. For example the Xiongnu 匈奴 Liu Yuan 劉淵, founder of the first of the so called Sixteen Barbarian states, Han-Zhao (漢趙 304–329) is described in the *Jinshu* as having long arms like those of an ape (*yuanbi* 猿臂) and being a good archer (*shanshe* 善射). He was stronger than others (*luli guoren* 膂力

<sup>7</sup> ZZTJ 99.3140.

<sup>8</sup> JS 123.3077.

過人) and had a massive, tall body (*ziyi kuiwein* 姿儀魁偉).<sup>9</sup> He stood eight feet and four inches.<sup>10</sup> His nephew, Liu Yao 劉曜, whom he admired, similarly to Murong Chui, had arms hanging below his knees (*chuishou guoxi* 垂手過膝) and had red light in his eyes (*muyou chiguang* 目有赤光).<sup>11</sup> Murong Han, one of Chui's uncles is also characterized as having ape-like arms and being a skillful archer (*yuanbi gongshe* 猿臂工射).<sup>12</sup> Another notable person of similar physique is none other than Fu Jian 苻堅, the formidable future adversary of the Murong. Fu Jian is also described as having arms hanging below his knees (*bichui guoxi* 臂垂過膝), and having purplish light (*muyou ziguang* 目有紫光) in his eyes. His father, Fu Hong 苻洪 found it curious and (because of this) liked him (*qi er aizhi* 奇而愛之).<sup>13</sup> It is also noteworthy that both Chui and Fu Jian were favored by their fathers because – or at least partly because – of their outstanding or peculiar physical features, especially long arms.

Jun is also recorded as possessing unusual bodily features. According to the *Jinshu* when Jun was born his grandfather, Murong Hui noticed that his bones were somewhat unusual (*gu xiang buheng* 骨相不恆) and took it as a sign of Jun one day becoming an emperor. Jun is also described as having a tall, robust body and possessing both literary talent and military prowess (*you wen wu ganlüe* 有文武幹略).<sup>14</sup> In the latter, however, Murong Chui exceeded him by far.

From the above it is clear that an unhealthy rivalry developed between the two bothers. Jun was resentful of Chui, probably in part because of his previous military achievements. Besides this, we cannot exclude the possibility that Murong Hui's admiration and treatment of Jun as future emperor, which was discontinued and diverted to Chui by his father, was a factor here.

Like nearly all military leaders of the era, Chui (at that time still named Ba) too loved to hunt. According to our sources<sup>15</sup> during one such occasion he fell off his horse and broke his front teeth. Jun then referring to his loss of teeth changed Ba's name first to Que, which means "deficient". Later he discovered that the character had an auspicious meaning in prophecies,<sup>16</sup> and thus he again changed his brother's name to Chui 垂, by the deletion of the 夬 part of the character.

<sup>9</sup> A variant of this particular expression is found in the description of Tuyan 吐延 (JS 97.2538), son of Tuyuhun 吐谷渾 and founder of the Tuyuhun Kingdom: *xiongzi kuijie* 雄姿魁傑.

<sup>10</sup> JS 101.2646.

<sup>11</sup> JS 103.2683.

<sup>12</sup> JS 109.2826.

<sup>13</sup> JS 113.2883.

<sup>14</sup> JS 110.2831, Schreiber 1956: 2.

<sup>15</sup> JS 123.3077, ZZTJ 99, TPYL 125.605.

<sup>16</sup> In TPYL 125.605 and JS 123.3077: *chenji zhi wen* 識記之文, in ZZTJ 99.3140: *ying chenwen* 應識文.

Murong Ba's new final name, Chui, does not have a discernible negative meaning, but Jun's initial attempt to give him a scornful name, overtly speaks of his animosity towards Chui. Unfortunately, our sources do not tell us what sorts of emotions Chui had towards Jun.

### **The Succession of Murong Jun**

From the above we can see that Huang had overtly favored Chui and according to one of our sources wanted Chui to succeed him. However, later he was dissuaded from doing so by his ministers. Schreiber, citing this same source,<sup>17</sup> writes that "The court protested because Jun had the right of succession by his priority of birth". Despite this, the Chinese text of this part of the chapter does not mention the reason for the protest.

It does not explain why they stopped him and thus Schreiber's explanation that "Jun had the right of succession by his priority of birth" is clearly not evidenced in the source. While Schreiber is most probably right in assuming that Jun's priority of birth was the reason, it leaves unanswered the question why the priority of birth was so important for the officials.

On this point, De Crespigny puts forward the following argument about succession in China: "In China imperial succession came to the son who was chosen by the reigning emperor: it was often advantageous for the dynasty that the eldest son should be chosen, but it was not always desirable and certainly not required."<sup>18</sup> With this in mind, one might not be mistaken to assume that the officials' protest was not merely for the sake of convention, but probably was due to concerns about the possibility of Jun's rebellion if Chui had succeeded his father.

Furthermore, Jun's claim to the throne would not only have been supported by the traditional Chinese preference for the first son, but also by the fact that the precedent of such successions had already been set in Yan. Both the father, Murong Huang, and grandfather, Murong Hui 慕容廆 were the eldest sons of their father. In all probability the officials knew the sons' temperaments well and, perhaps by judging their personalities, could see that Chui would be less likely to revolt if Jun succeeded their father. Additionally, Chui's claim to the throne – despite being favored by his father – was weaker than Jun's by traditional Chinese standards. To all appearances the intention of Huang's officials was to prevent or at least to minimize the chances of a civil war. If this holds true, they were successful, but only in the short term. Chui did not revolt, but on the contrary he continued to serve Yan's interests with exceptional dedication.

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<sup>17</sup> ZZTJ 99.3140.

<sup>18</sup> De Crespigny 1984: 510–511/32.

Nonetheless, as we shall see, in the long run Chui's loyalty and further achievements were the very factors that fed Jun's jealousy and thus accelerated the development of a serious crisis – but for the time being – not civil war within the Yan government.

I am convinced that Jun's later suspicious and hostile treatment of Chui, was not solely based on his general resentment of Chui might try to seize the throne from him at an opportune moment. The Xianbei traditions of assuming leadership had been radically different from the Chinese, and despite the fact that the Murong had already adopted Chinese ways in the times of Chui and Jun, these old traditions had not completely vanished. De Crespigny argues, for instance, that among the Wuhuan 烏桓 (close relatives of the Xianbei) the chiefs' power was not hereditary.<sup>19</sup> According to the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 the Wuhuan elected as chiefs those who were brave, strong, and able to make just decisions.<sup>20</sup> The Xianbei ruler, Tanshihuai's 檀石槐 ascent in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. suggests that similarly to the Wuhuan, the Xianbei too traditionally elected their rulers based on their abilities and personal qualities.<sup>21</sup> The *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 describes Tanshihuai as “brave, strong and wise and resourceful” (*yongjian you zhilue* 勇健有智略) and records that he was elected chief (*tui yi wei daren* 推以為大人) after he defeated an adversary who had stolen livestock from his family. After this act of bravery none dared resist him.

Despite the fact that the previous two rulers represent an important precedent among the Murong, both Huang and Hui were the eldest sons of their fathers, it is prescient that their successions had not been smooth. Hui was the legitimate designated heir, but after his father's death in 283, his throne was usurped by his uncle. He eventually succeeded to ascend the throne only after the usurper was assassinated by his own men in 285. Soon after this, a conflict broke out between Hui and his half-brother, Tuyuhun 吐谷渾 who probably posed a threat to his position.<sup>22</sup> Hui's son, Murong Huang, suffered from an even more precarious position as ruler at the beginning. After Hui's death in 333, a war erupted between him and his brothers, who allied themselves with the Duan 段 and the Yuwen, old enemies of the Murong. Only after having defeated them by 336-337 did he become the undisputed sovereign of the Murong.<sup>23</sup> This clearly indicates that the succession of the first son by the legitimate wife was not at all indisputable at Murong Hui during Murong Huang's time. Murong traditions still provided enough leeway for Huang's brothers to challenge each other's

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<sup>19</sup> De Crespigny 1984: 366.

<sup>20</sup> HHS 90.2979.

<sup>21</sup> Gardiner & De Crespigny 1977: 21.

<sup>22</sup> Yihong 2013: 275.

<sup>23</sup> Schreiber 1955: 419–422.

position on the basis of their own power and abilities. Therefore it would be unsurprising that after Huang's death, Jun anticipated that danger on the part of Chui, the most talented and extolled of his brothers, was imminent.

### Murong Chui's Further Services

By the time of Murong Huang's reign (337–348) the Murong had defeated their local rivals the Yuwen and the Duan as well as the prominent Chinese warlords of Northeast China, and had begun to threaten Later Zhao. Not long after Murong Huang's death in 349, turmoil broke out in Zhao, from which the ethnic Chinese Shi Min 石閔, the adopted son of the ruler Shi Hu 石虎, emerged victorious. Shi Min assumed his original family name Ran 冉 and, having defeated his step-brothers and other contenders, established a new dynasty by the name Wei 魏, customarily referred to as Ran-Wei (冉魏 349–352).<sup>24</sup>

As we have seen, Chui had had experience in defending Yan territory from Zhao advances. Consequently, when the turmoil broke out in Zhao he saw an opportunity to wage war and wrote a memorandum to Jun:<sup>25</sup>

“Shi Hu is utterly evil and excessively cruel. Heaven has abandoned him [his state] is in ruins and [its people] are butchering each other. Currently China is in sore straits. [The people] are longing for humanity and relief so much that if a great army arrived, they would join in to fight.”<sup>26</sup>

石虎窮凶極暴，天之所弃，餘燼僅存，自相魚肉。今中國倒懸，企望仁恤，若大軍一振，勢必投戈。

Jun did not approve, responding that the mourning period after their father's death was not yet over, therefore they should not start a war. Chui then visited Jun in Longcheng to convince him personally:

“Now is the time to seize this opportunity, which is hard to obtain and easy to lose. If by any chance the Shi family recovers from its decline, or a hero emerges from among them and they start mobilizing their resources, then we will lose our advantage and I am afraid we will find ourselves in great trouble.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Holcombe 2019: 130.

<sup>25</sup> Schreiber 1956: 4.

<sup>26</sup> ZZTJ 98.3092.

<sup>27</sup> SLGCQ26.97 (<https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=58905&page=97> last accessed: 11.09.2021.)



難得而易失者，時也。萬一石氏衰而復興，或有英雄據其成資，豈惟失此大利，亦恐更爲後患。

Jun in his reply warned about the risks of the proposed campaign. Yet this time he did not use the mourning period as an excuse, instead arguing that the operation would be simply too dangerous. Chui in his reply expanded on his master plan, which entailed a surprise attack in the vicinity of Deng Heng's base, where his troops were stationed. He argued that this surprise attack would frighten the soldiers into retreat for their morale was already very low due to the disturbances and inner turmoil ensuing from Shi Hu's demise. After this surprise attack – as Chui proposed – Jun could advance westward with his army without meeting any obstacles.<sup>28</sup>

From this we can surmise that the main reason of Jun's reluctance to attack Zhao was not in fact the current mourning period, but the seemingly hazardous prospects of the campaign. Nevertheless, Jun's worries about the risks cannot be taken at full face value with the knowledge of his contempt and envy for his brother. There is good reason to postulate that Jun was more concerned about a particular consequence of a successful campaign: an increase in Chui's popularity. Indeed, it is palpable in the light of the beneficial outcomes for Jun in Chui's plans. Chui's proposal to clear the way for Jun's troops, allowing his brother to finish the campaign triumphantly had the potential to eliminate both of Jun's concerns as well as the threat posed by the looming recuperation of Later Zhao.

After this Jun consulted three of his advisors, all of whom supported Chui's idea of the campaign. One of them, Muyu Gen 慕輿根 pushed impatiently for the launching of the campaign and was in complete agreement with Chui's earlier recommendations, arguing that the turmoil within the Shi clan and among the people in Central North-China provided a rare opportunity that should not be missed. Furthermore, in his reply Muyu Gen intimated that without taking immediate action Jun would not be able to conquer China (*qu Tianxia* 取天下).<sup>29</sup>

In 350, Jun convinced by Chui and his advisors finally agreed and launched a huge campaign with 200 000 soldiers. Chui was set in motion according to his plans commanding 20 000 troops. A son and a brother of the late Murong Huang, Murong Ke 慕容恪 and Murong Ping 慕容評 were appointed into high military positions and played major roles in the offensive.<sup>30</sup> The war with Ran-Wei lasted till the autumn of 352 but it proved to be a great success. Ran Min was captured and put to death in Longcheng. Soon after this Yan forces occupied the city of Ye (Yecheng 鄴城, Hebei, Handan), the Ran-Wei capital. The following

<sup>28</sup> Schreiber 1956: 5.

<sup>29</sup> In Schreiber's translation "to become emperor" (Schreiber 1956: 7).

<sup>30</sup> Schreiber 1956: 7.



year Jun assumed imperial dignity, created his wife, Kezuhun 可足渾 empress, designated his crown-prince (who later predeceased him) and moved his capital to the newly occupied Jicheng 薊城 (modern day South-West Beijing). Murong Ping was posted to Yecheng as defender and administrator, while Murong Ke was sent to further campaigns in the newly conquered territories which had in the meantime rebelled against Yan.<sup>31</sup> Not surprisingly, Murong Chui was granted only a humble position. He was appointed *Head of the Imperial Supervisorate* (*Jishi huangmen shilang* 給事黃門侍郎). Schreiber notes that his salary was equal to that of the magistrate of a smaller prefecture.<sup>32</sup> Jun's intention to inhibit Chui's advancement from these developments is discernible.

### Chui's Supporters

Chui due to his close relatedness to the Jun, and his accomplishments was too conspicuous of a person to simply efface him. Previously Murong Huang had entrusted the task of conquering Central China to Jun and advised him to appoint capable and wise men to important offices, such as another of his sons, the "exceptionally brave and wise" (*zhi yong jian ji* 智勇兼濟, *li kan ren zhong* 力堪任重) Murong Ke.<sup>33</sup> In the conquests that had allowed Jun to proclaim himself emperor, Chui had unquestionable merits. Murong Ke, was probably the most popular person in Yan and the most feared one by Yan's enemies and at the same time a persistent supporter of Chui. He and two of his uncles repeatedly asked, and finally persuaded Jun to give Chui a high office that would match his talents (*ming shi zhi cai* 命世之才, *yi zong da ren* 宜總大任). Thus Jun delegated Chui to Changshan 常山 (Hebei 河北, Shijiazhuang 石家莊) and granted him the titles: *General delegated by the Imperial Court to pacify the East* (*shichijie andong jiangjun* 使持節安東將軍) and *Inspector of the northern part of Ji province* (*bei Jizhou cishi* 北冀州刺史). The next year Chui was appointed governor of the entire province and his seat was moved to Xindu 信都 (Hebei, Hengshui 衡水), the regular residence of the governors of Ji. Later, Chui was appointed to an even higher position, as the commander of the old capital, Longcheng and was conferred the title *Palace attendant* (*shizhong* 侍中). According to the *Zizhi Tongjian*, Chui's renaming (from Ba to Chui) took place around the time of this latest elevation in position.<sup>34</sup> All of the above reveals that Chui's gradual ascent in power was taking place despite Jun's still

<sup>31</sup> Schreiber 1956: 38–40.

<sup>32</sup> Schreiber 1956: 40.

<sup>33</sup> TPYL 121.583 (Murong Huang), Schreiber 1949: 480.

<sup>34</sup> Schreiber 1956: 41, ZZTJ 99.3140.

extant adversity towards him. This was certainly partly due to pressure from his influential relatives, his brother, Ke and their two uncles. To some extent, Jun might have thought that besides making Chui content with his position in Yan's leadership, his abilities and talent needed to be put to greater use. Moreover, Chui himself needed to be kept occupied in order to eliminate the threat Jun felt from this direction and there can be little doubt that this was a primary interest for Jun. The location to where Chui was posted – in my opinion – is also telling. The theater of Yan's expansion was still located in the West and soon after Jun became emperor a new front opened in the South. Chui's new base, the previous capital, Longcheng was located in the Northeast, the ancestral lands of the Murong. As more and more attention had to be paid elsewhere, the defense and upkeep of this traditional center of Yan was undoubtedly a prestigious task for Chui and also useful for the dynasty. Thus sending Chui to Longcheng initially might have seemed the ideal solution for Jun, but in the long run even this was unable to guarantee the continued overshadowing of Chui's talents:

“Chui succeeded in making the Northeast peaceful, thus Jun recovered his hatred against him and called him back”<sup>35</sup>

垂大得東北之和，俊愈惡之，復召還。

At this point, Jun must have been perplexed as to what to do with Chui next. Sending him into a “prestigious exile” with the goal of making him more or less content and useful yet at the same time harmless had not worked out. Getting rid of him either by imprisonment or execution would certainly have infuriated his influential relatives and a number of advisors and supporters of Chui at court. At this point, a high official Nie Hao 涅皓 appeared to offer a solution to Jun's problem. He accused Chui's wife and an accomplice of witchcraft in an effort to tarnish Chui's reputation by association (*lianwu* 連污). We know no more about Nie Hao 涅皓 appeared to offer a solution to this problem. He accused Chui's wife and her accomplice of witchcraft in an effort to tarnish Chui's reputation by association (*lianwu* 連污). We do not know more about Nie Hao than what the *Zizhi Tongjian* tells us, notably that he held the position of *Palace attendant-in-ordinary* (*zhongchangshi* 中常侍) and that his motivation to make the accusation was to please the Emperor (the *Zizhi Tongjian* uses the term *xizhi* 希旨 “to cater to the will of a superior”).<sup>36</sup> Nor are we told what sort of benefit Nie Hao could have expected. The fact that the main target of the accusation was not Chui himself has two likely explanations. Firstly, caution

<sup>35</sup> Schreiber 1956: 41 translates: “Chün became jealous” (Chün = Jun).

<sup>36</sup> Schreiber 1956: 41, About the title *zhongchangshi*: Hucker 1985: 188/1532.

may have persuaded Hao not to directly accuse a person of such high standing as Chui. Secondly, and in concord with the first, a mutual grudge between the wives of Jun and Chui offered an excellent opportunity to harm Chui's reputation without having to deal with him directly. The *Zizhi Tongjian* explains that Chui's wife was the daughter of Duan Mopei 段末怀, former chief of the Duan tribe, whom the Murong had defeated in 337. Chui's wife, Lady Duan is described as being talented and having a fiery temperament (*cai gao xing lie* 才高性烈) and regarding herself of noble origin had no respect for Jun's wife, the Empress, lady Kezuhun. This made lady Kezuhun and Jun belligerent (*xian* 銜) and displeased (*bukuai* 不快). Jun arrested Lady Duan and her official and sent them to be tortured. The torture got harsher every day but they were resolute and did not confess, even when Chui asked her wife to do so by means of a secret messenger. In her answer Lady Duan explained:

"I'd rather die than to disgrace my ancestors above, and bring trouble to you (the king) down on earth by falsely confessing to a terrible crime. I will definitely not do this!"<sup>37</sup>

吾豈愛死者耶！若自誣以惡逆，上辱祖宗，下累於王，固不為也！

Schreiber translates the words: *lei yu wang* (累於王) as "involve my husband" which implies that Lady Duan's confession could have been used against Chui himself. Thanks to Lady Duan not confessing, Chui was spared (*de mian guo* 得免禍) but sent farther East, to Liadong as governor of Ping province (Pingzhou 平州). Soon after Lady Duan perished from the torture. According to Xianbei customs, Chui then took his deceased wife's younger sister as his second wife. However, Kezuhun intervened, deposing Chui's new wife and forcing him to marry her sister. This made Chui hate Kezuhun even more.<sup>38</sup>

In 351, during the war between Yan and Ran-Wei, Former Qin emerged as a new state out of the ruins of Later Zhao. Former Qin occupied Chang'an 長安 and made the city its capital thus becoming Yan's main rival in North China. The Jin dynasty with which Murong Jun formally severed ties when he proclaimed himself Emperor in 353, also started to pose a serious threat not only to Yan but to Qin as well. In 354 Huan Wen 桓溫, Jin's famed general, attempted to take Chang'an but the Qin forces had harvested all the wheat around the city in advance, forcing the Jin troops to retreat as they began to run out of supplies.

<sup>37</sup> SLGCQ 51.88 (<https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=58920&page=88> last accessed: 11.09.2021.)

<sup>38</sup> Schreiber 1956: 42, ZZTJ 100.3173.

In the following years Yan was busy consolidating its grip on its newly acquired territories. In the years 358 and 359 a district governor from Jin launched three successive invasions against Yan, but each time he was defeated and the Yan forces even managed to occupy some Jin territory.<sup>39</sup> In 360 Murong Jun died and many in Jin saw it as a good opportunity to resume its aggression against Yan and to embark on the reoccupation of North-China. Only Huan Wen argued against the invasion reasoning that as long as Murong Ke was alive they could not defeat Yan.

### Chui, an Unrewarded Hero

Shortly before his death, Jun asked Ke to be his heir to the throne (his designated crown-prince had died) but Ke refused and proposed that instead he would serve as regent of the new emperor, Jun's other son Murong Wei, who was a minor, 慕容暉. Jun agreed and during his regency Ke constantly warned the young emperor against employing the wrong people, and tried to bring Chui back to power. This seven-year period (360–367) is marked by Former Yan's mostly successful campaigns against Jin. In 365 Ke and Chui besieged and took Luoyang 洛陽, the former capital of China from Jin.<sup>40</sup> After this great victory Chui became the governor of Jing province (*Jingzhou mu* 荊州牧) with his seat in Luyang 魯陽 (Henan, Lushan 魯山), and was bestowed the title *Grand Commander-in-chief who conquers the south* (*zhengnan da jiangjun* 征南大將軍).<sup>41</sup> Chui thus became a high ranking military leader, in charge of the military affairs of ten provinces and an army of ten thousand soldiers.<sup>42</sup> From these developments it is evident that Ke intended to assign Chui an important role in the wars with Jin. It is not beyond possibility that Ke was striving to build up Chui to become either his successor as regent – or one day – even emperor. Ke is recorded to have said to the Murong Wei:

“Chui, the prince of Wu is ten times as talented as myself, both as a general and as a minister. Only because of the order of seniority did the late emperor make me precede him. I wish that after my death Your Majesty will entrust the affairs of the whole country to the Prince of Wu”.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Schreiber 1956: 56–57.

<sup>40</sup> Schreiber 1956: 69–71, Bielenstein 1996: 77.

<sup>41</sup> Schreiber 1956: 71.

<sup>42</sup> ZZTJ 101.3199.

<sup>43</sup> ZZTJ 101.3205.

吳王垂，將相之才，十倍於臣。先帝以長幼之次，故臣得先之。臣死之後，願陛下舉國以聽吳王。

Later on his deathbed, Ke turned to him once more and said:

“If Your Majesty entrusts the government to him (Chui), then the country will be safe, otherwise – I am afraid – our two enemies (Qin and Jin) will certainly be on the lookout for a plan.”<sup>44</sup>

陛下若任之以政，國其少安。不然，臣恐二寇必有窺窬之計。

Ke had also turned to his vice-regent, Murong Ping, and the emperor's elder brother, Murong Zang 慕容臧 and told them separately that the safety of the country (*guojia anwei* 國家安危) depended on Chui, the most talented of the eligible candidates, being given the most important military position of *Commander of the armies* (*da sima* 大司馬) one which was equivalent to Huan Wen's position in the Jin.<sup>45</sup>

In 367 however, Chui's fortunes changed when Ke, his only supporter of considerable power died. As a consequence, it was to be Murong Ping and not Chui, who took over as the new regent.<sup>46</sup> Ping was one of the youngest sons of Murong Hui, and thus the uncle of Jun, Chui, and Ke. Our sources describe him as envious (*duo caiji* 多猜忌), and greatly concerned about whom to appoint as the *Commander of the armies*. Eventually this position was granted to a then rather insignificant member of the family, Murong Chong 慕容冲, one of the emperor's younger brothers.<sup>47</sup> At this time the emperor was still under the strong influence of her mother, Kezuhun and his regent, Ping, neither of whom wished to see Chui advance in rank or in prestige. In 368, the year following Ke's death, a serious revolt occurred in Qin. Four of Fu Jian's relatives rebelled against his rule and were willing to cooperate with Yan against their overlord. Chui, his younger brother, Murong De 慕容德 and others suggested that Yan take advantage of the situation and launch a major invasion against Qin to conquer North-China. However, Ping – who according to the *Jinshu* had been secretly accepting presents (*jianhuo* 間貨) from Fu Jian – opposed the idea of an inva-

<sup>44</sup> JS 111.2859.

<sup>45</sup> The *Jinshu* (JS 111.2853 mentions Huan Wen as the Jin's *commander of the armies*: *Jin da sima* 晉大司馬).

<sup>46</sup> ZZTJ 101.3208–3209, Schreiber 1956: 76.

<sup>47</sup> ZZTJ 101.3209,

sion on the grounds that the conquest of Qin would be an insurmountable task for Yan and the best they could do against Qin was to defend their borders.<sup>48</sup>

In 367, shortly after Ke's death, a Jin provincial governor launched an attack against Yan and retook the city of Yuan (Yuancheng), which Yan had earlier taken from Jin. When seeing that Yan did not retaliate for more than a year, Huan Wen took it as a sign of weakness and prepared for a major invasion of Yan. His troops swiftly advanced towards the North, taking Murong Chong, the *Commander of the armies* prisoner on the way. Huan Wen's forces also defeated Murong Chui's troops and all other armies sent successively against them by the emperor. At this point Wei and Ping decided to abandon the capital, the city of Ye, and flee further north to Yan's old capital, Longcheng.

At this crucial moment Chui volunteered to lead another attack against the invaders, saying to the emperor:

"I request to attack them. Even if I do not win, it still will not be late to escape."<sup>49</sup>

臣請擊之，若戰不捷，走未晚也。

In such a desperate situation the emperor was unable to refuse Chui's offer. Giving Chui 50,000 troops and appointing him as *Grand Commander-in-chief for a punitive expedition into the South especially delegated by the Imperial Court* (*shichijie nantao dajiangjun* 使持節南討大都督), the emperor placed him in charge of the counter attack with the assistance of Murong De as *Commander-in-chief who conquers the South* (*zhengnan jiangjun* 征南將軍).<sup>50</sup> In the meantime, Wei sent a diplomatic mission to Qin to ask for additional help, offering a portion of Yan's territory in exchange. The Qin court, figuring that it would be easier to defeat Jin first and Yan later, agreed to help and sent 20 000 troops, infantry and cavalry to Yan's rescue.<sup>51</sup> Before their arrival, the brothers, Chui and De inflicted a disastrous defeat on Huan Wen's troops by setting a trap and then launching a second brutal attack on their exhausted and retreating soldiers. Hearing of this, the Qin troops launched a third attack on Huan Wen's remaining forces.

In the meantime, during the years following Jun's death, Kezuhun's relatives began to dominate the government (*rao guozheng* 虜國政), a phenomenon that frequently occurred in China when imperial widows were in power.<sup>52</sup> Murong Ping is also recorded to have been seeking to enrich himself at the expense of the state.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup> S 111.2851, Taskin 1992:102.

<sup>49</sup> JS 111.2853.

<sup>50</sup> JS 111.2853, ZZTJ 102.3215

<sup>51</sup> Schreiber 1956: 87–90.

<sup>52</sup> ZZTJ 102.3225, Schreiber 1956: 82.

<sup>53</sup> Schreiber 1956: 81.

Chui earned great merit on the battlefield and his reputation (*weide* 威德, *weiming* 威名) grew all the more (*mizhen* 彌振, *dazhen* 大振, *yizhen* 益振), which frustrated (*buping* 不平, *da buping* 大不平) Ping and made him deeply envious (*shen ji'e* 深忌惡, *yuji* 愈忌).

The *Zizhi Tongjian* is the only source that mentions that Chui, having returned from the battlefield, appealed to Ping to promote and reward his brave and outstanding generals, yet Ping, after looking into all these cases did nothing. Chui repeated his request several times and frequently quarreled over it with Ping at Court. As a result of this, their resentments and differences deepened (*yuan xi yu shen* 怨隙愈深). Kezuhun, who had always hated Chui, disparaged his war merits and in collaboration with Ping secretly plotted to execute (*mimou zhu* 密謀誅) him. At this time, one of Murong Ke's son, having learned of the plot, suggested that Chui attacked Ping, but Chui refused. Instead, in fear of his safety he fled to Fu Jian together with his sons.

The other sources are briefer about this episode and simply state that Kezuhun and Ping out of jealousy and hatred, planned to kill (*mou sha* 謀殺) or execute (*mou zhu* 謀誅) Chui, who then fled to Fu Jian.<sup>54</sup> The *Zizhi Tongjian* contain much more details about Chui's flight. According to this source, Chui first headed towards Longcheng, but one of his sons, Murong Lin 慕容麟, who had always been resentful towards his father, turned back and reported him. Only when Ping sent an army against Chui, did he turn back and flee to Fu Jian instead. The younger sister of Chui's murdered wife, and several of Chui's sons, as well as other supporters followed him to join the ranks of Fu Jian. Fu Jian was a natural rival of Yan and completely interested in its destruction. Our sources agree that similarly to Huan Wen, Fu Jian had not risked to attack Yan as long as Murong Ke had been alive. Moreover, even after Ke's death he had kept his anti-Yan plans in secret, and as we have seen he had even assisted Yan in his defense against Jin. Now that Yan had its internal problems and Chui had sought refuge at his court, Fu Jian decided that the time was ripe for an invasion. The *casus belli* was provided by Murong Wei, who had gone back on his promise to concede a portion of its territory for Qin's military assistance. Not surprisingly it was Murong Ping whom the emperor entrusted with the command of 300 000 elite troops to defend Yan from the invaders. The Qin general was leading only 60 000 troops, cavalry and infantry into Yan territory. However as a result of Ping's attempt to increase his wealth during the campaign by selling firewood and water from the forests and streams to his own soldiers, the Qin troops scored a decisive victory over the Yan forces.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> JS 111.2853, 123.3078.

<sup>55</sup> Schreiber 1956: 97–123.



Thus in 370, Qin completely defeated Yan and moved all the Murong and other notable families of Yan to Chang'an and its vicinities. Within the next five years Qin, became the first among the Barbarian dynasties to conquer the whole of North China, though this unity lasted for only a brief seven years.

In Qin Murong Chui became one of the most important generals of Fu Jian. When in 383 Fu Jian decided to attack Jin in order to conquer South China, Murong Chui with his troops participated in his campaign. Qin suffered a disastrous defeat at the Battle of the Fei river (*Feishui zhizhan* 淝水之戰), but Chui's contingent remained intact.<sup>56</sup> After the defeat, Fu Jian's empire disintegrated and several leaders from states that Qin had subjugated earlier, rebelled and restored their independence. New states also appeared from the ruins of Qin.<sup>57</sup> Murong Chui like many of his contemporaries, turned his back on Fu Jian and restored Yan (Later Yan, Hou Yan 後燕 384–407), this time with himself as emperor. However, he was not the only one among the Murong with this ambition. Murong Wei was executed by Fu Jian in 385, but one of his younger brothers, Murong Hong 慕容泓 established another, rival state by the name Yan (Western Yan, Xi Yan 西燕 384–394). Thus for the first decade of their independence the two Yan states existed simultaneously and in opposition to each other. Later, after a grave defeat at the hands of another Xianbei tribe, the Tabgach (Tuoba 拓拔), a portion of the Murong led by Chui's brother Murong De broke away from Later Yan and founded another state, Southern Yan (Nan Yan 南燕 398–410). They were eliminated by a Jin invasion, while Later Yan was destroyed by a coup and replaced by yet another Yan state, Northern Yan. In short, the Murong were incapable of achieving unity ever again and consequently it was not them, but the Tabgach who succeeded in unifying North China and maintaining this unity, not only for a few years, but for almost a century (439–534). Moreover, the unifiers of China – both South and North - i.e. the imperial houses of the Sui 隋 (581–617) and Tang 唐 (617–907) dynasties were closely linked to the Tabgach state, Northern Wei (Bei Wei 北魏, 386–534).<sup>58</sup> Yet the achievements of the Murong did not vanish completely without trace as the system of dual administration that they had developed in the northeast was borrowed by the Tabgach. Undoubtedly North China's unity could not have lasted that long under their rule without it.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Holcombe 2019a [CHC 2/5]: 112–114, Holcombe 2019b [CHC 2/6]: 137, Bielenstein 1996: 86–87, Rogers 1968.

<sup>57</sup> Graf 2019 [CHC 2/12]: 279.

<sup>58</sup> Holcombe 2013: 1–2, 24, 34, Sanping 1996: 51–55.

<sup>59</sup> Pearce 2019 [CHC 2/8]: 158/14, Barfield 1992: 118.

## Conclusions

From the review of our primary sources it is evident that Murong Chui's exclusion from the highest echelons of government and military affairs brought about the demise of the Yan state and deprived the Murong of their chance to become the unifiers of North China. That they might have had such aspirations suggests Muyu Gen's above-quoted warning: "without taking immediate action the emperor will not be able to conquer China." The root of the problem was that it was not Chui but his father's favorite Jun, the eldest son, who inherited the throne. This happened at the behest of Chinese officials who believed their actions would prevent civil war. Here a conflict between Xianbei and Chinese traditions of inheritance is palpable. During the later years of Murong Huang's reign and perhaps even after his death, Yan was in a crucial period of transformation from a Barbarian border state into a Chinese dynasty. Murong Chui's designation as heir would have been the perfect decision for the purposes of a former type of polity. Murong Huang's final decision about the inheritance was completely in line with the Murong's growth in power and probably was also based on his concerns about a possibility of civil war, one that as an eldest son himself, he had had to fight in order to secure his own throne. Murong Jun's designation as heir offered a solution and worked, at least in the short run. First, it probably helped the Murong to secure the loyalty of their Chinese subjects.<sup>60</sup> Second, the first years of Jun's rule were without doubt the most successful years of Yan and Chui did not rebel against his brother, on the contrary, without his assistance Jun could not have proclaimed himself emperor. In the long run however, the slowly but steadily brewing conflict among the members of the imperial family, especially after Murong Ke's death eventually led to the corruption of the leadership and the desertion of Chui. Yan was a "family affair" of the Murong as Schreiber has put it, and the deterioration of family relationships caused the fall of their state.

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<sup>60</sup> About this problem see Schreiber 1956: 123–127.

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