The book cover features a misty, green-tinted bamboo forest. In the center, several silhouettes of figures in traditional Chinese attire are visible, standing in a line. The overall atmosphere is serene and historical.

Bamboo Grove

The Seven Sages of Ancient China
and Anonymous Voices of Today

By Roland Nansink

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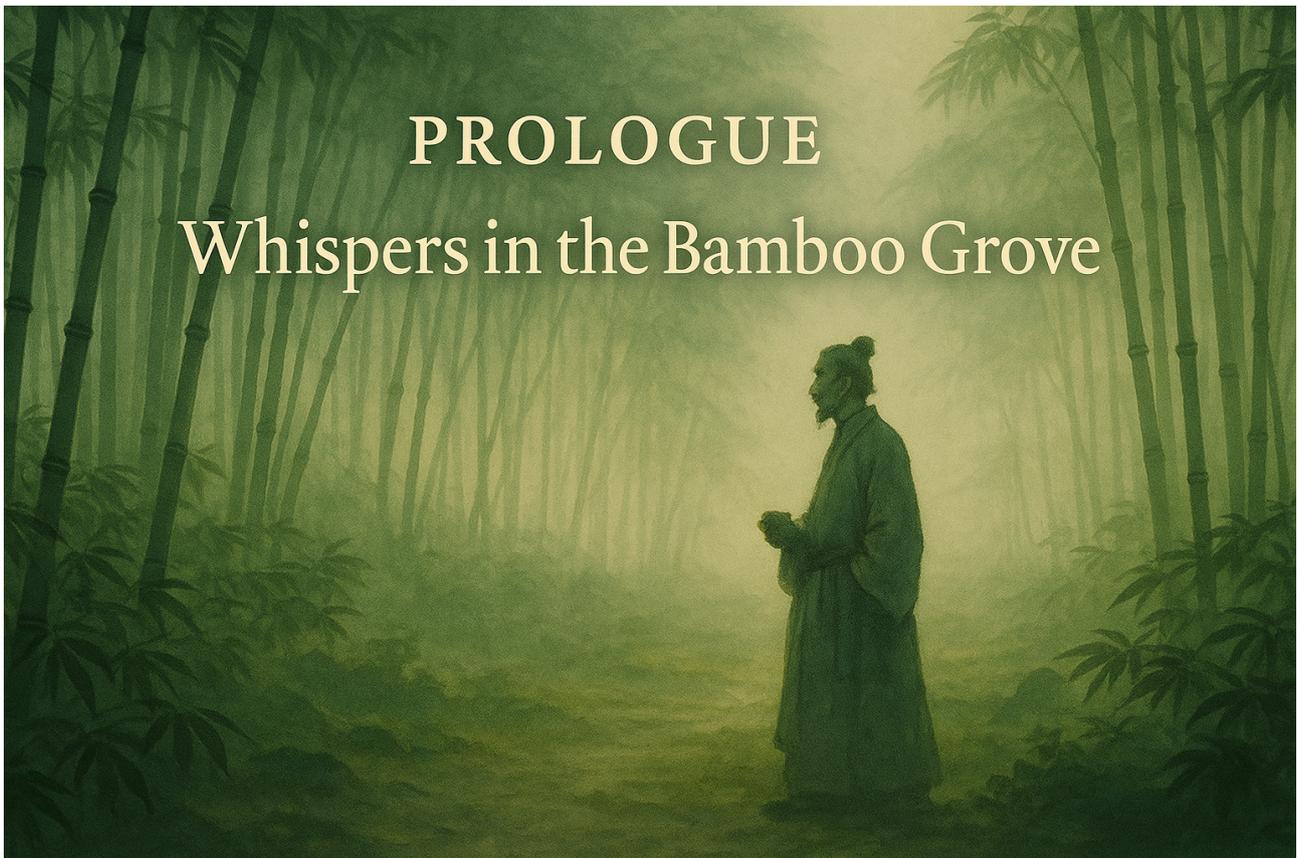
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PROLOGUE

Whispers in the Bamboo Grove

Prologue: Whispers in the Bamboo Grove

In an ancient kingdom, a fearful servant slips into a quiet bamboo forest and shouts a forbidden secret: “*The king has donkey’s ears!*” charactermedia.com. According to a Korean folktale recorded in the 13th-century *Samguk Yusa* chronicles, the servant’s words were carried by the wind through the rustling bamboo, repeating the scandalous truth that no one dared speak aloud charactermedia.com. The bamboo grove became an unwitting confessional – a place where truth could be voiced without pointing a finger at the speaker. Centuries later, in the digital age, “**Bamboo Grove**” (대나무숲) lives on as a metaphor for anonymous forums and confession boards where people spill secrets or vent frustrations under the comforting cover of anonymity charactermedia.com. We humans, it seems, have always needed safe spaces to express what we truly think and feel.

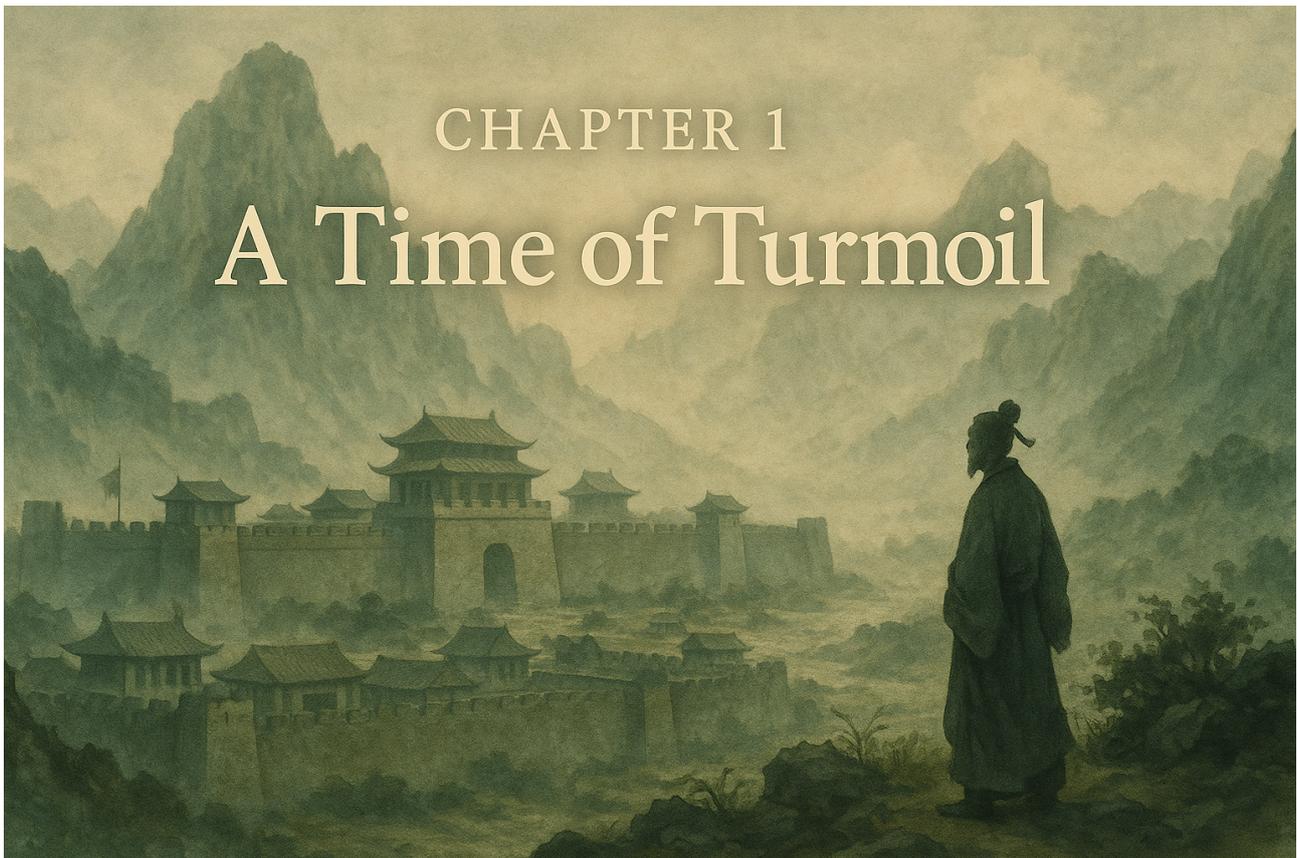
This book is a journey between two such bamboo groves – one literal and one figurative. On one side is the **Bamboo Grove of ancient China**, where a band of 3rd-century scholars known as the **Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove** gathered to escape the perilous intrigues of imperial court

life. On the other side are the “**bamboo forests**” of cyberspace, the online anonymous communities where modern people candidly share their minds. Though separated by **millennia**, these groves share a common spirit: they are refuges for honesty, creativity, and dissent when the outside world grows oppressive.

In the chapters that follow, we will step into the dappled shade of an estate in **Wei-Jin era China**. We will meet seven brilliant, eccentric friends – poets, musicians, philosophers – who retreated to a bamboo grove seeking freedom from hypocrisy and danger britannica.com. Through narrative and translated snippets of their poems and essays, we will glimpse their world: a world of flowing wine and spontaneous verse, Daoist “pure conversations” and hidden critiques of authority britannica.com. We will feel the tensions tugging at them – loyalty versus integrity, pleasure versus duty – and watch how they chose personal truth over public office, even at great cost.

Woven alongside their tale, we will draw parallels to **our own era**. As the Seven Sages confide in each other under swaying bamboo, we might recall a student posting a frank opinion on a university’s anonymous Facebook page, or an employee blowing off steam on a pseudonymous forum. The scenery changes – from a quiet forest clearing to the vast digital cloud – but the impulse is the same. In both realms, a voice whispers in safety what it cannot shout in public. The **Bamboo Grove**, whether physical or virtual, symbolizes that vital outlet for candid expression.

By exploring the narrative of the Seven Sages and the modern “bamboo forest” forums in tandem, this book aims to illuminate a timeless theme: the need for **authentic self-expression in the face of societal constraints**. Through engaging storytelling and factual detail, we will see how seven men’s retreat from a corrupt court became legend, and how their legacy resonates with anyone who has ever sought shelter in anonymity to speak from the heart. Like a prologue whispered into the bamboo and an epilogue typed into a forum, these stories echo each other across time. Let us enter the grove and listen.



CHAPTER 1

A Time of Turmoil

Chapter 1: A Time of Turmoil

The stage for our story is **3rd-century China**, an era of upheaval and uncertainty. The once-glorious Han Dynasty had fallen, fracturing the land into warring states. By the middle of the 200s A.D., the **Wei kingdom** (曹魏) controlled the north, but its court was rife with intrigue. Behind a façade of Confucian propriety lurked **hypocrisy and danger** [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com). Scholar-officials navigated a minefield of shifting alliances, scheming warlords, and draconian punishments for dissent. It was a world where a witty poem with a hidden meaning could be safer than an honest memo to the throne.

In the Wei court's final decades, power began to slip from the ruling Cao family into the hands of the ambitious **Sima clan** en.wikipedia.org. General Sima Yi and his sons gradually usurped control, and by 265 A.D. the Sima would replace Wei with their own **Jin Dynasty**. But the transition was anything but peaceful. There were coups and executions; as one historian noted, "few intellectuals of note were spared a violent end" in those days plato.stanford.edu. Living in the shadow of such violence,

many literati were gripped by anxiety. To speak one's mind at court was to risk one's life.

For a certain circle of free-thinking scholars, this atmosphere was suffocating. These were men steeped in **Confucian education** yet drawn to the mystical outlook of **Daoism**. They craved the liberty to discuss philosophy, art, and life without having to parrot the party line or fear persecution. A new trend known as **qīngtán** (清談) or “**pure conversation**” took hold among the educated elite britannica.com. In small gatherings, they would indulge in frank, unorthodox dialogue about metaphysics and morals. Pure conversation was **Daoist-oriented**, emphasizing spontaneity and individual expression over rigid etiquette britannica.com. It was an intellectual rebellion against the stifling decorum of court.

One could think of **qingtan salons** as the private chat rooms of their time – places to “think outside the box” safely. However, even these salons weren't entirely safe if held in the capital under watchful eyes. Some participants decided that to truly speak and live freely, they had to **step away from public office altogether**. Better to be **branded eccentric and live in peace** than to wear the gilded collar of a court official.

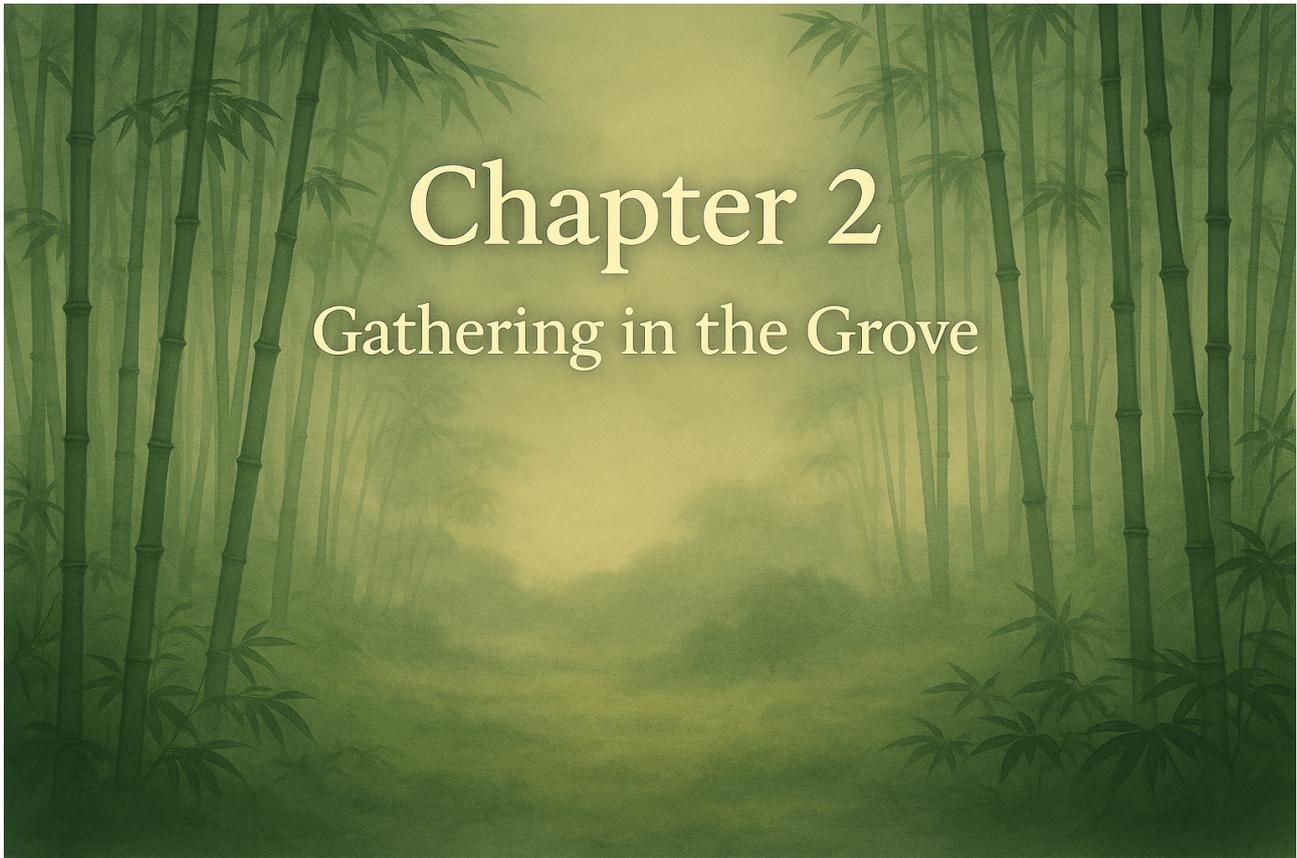
Thus arose the ideal of the **scholar-recluse**, one who withdraws to preserve integrity. This ideal had old roots in China – sages in legends often retreated to mountains or forests to escape tyrants. But in the 3rd century's turmoil, it became a tangible option for real people facing real dangers. To resign and retreat was not cowardice; it could be an act of moral courage. By giving up ambition and salary, a scholar could **keep his soul uncorrupted** and perhaps even critique society from a safe remove (often via artful allusions).

Amid the **chaos of war and regime change**, a handful of friends made exactly that choice. They left behind the dusty halls of Luoyang (the Wei capital) and traveled to the countryside. Their destination was an estate in *Shanyang*, a quiet district far from the centers of power britannica.com. There, a small bamboo grove would become the stage for their own alternative court – one with **wine cups for regalia, poetry for policy, and the rustle of bamboo leaves for applause**.

Before we join them in the rustic refuge, let us remember: this was not a carefree escapade born of whimsy. It was, in many ways, an **act of protest**. These men were turning their backs on a system they found **intolerably corrupt and perilous**. One of them would pay the ultimate price for his defiance, executed despite (or because of) his lofty principles britannica.com. All of them understood the risks of both speaking out and staying silent. Caught in a lose-lose situation, they carved a third path: **speak, but speak from a bamboo grove**.

Their story is set in a time of turmoil, but it echoes in any age of oppression. Whenever the “**political world of officialdom**” becomes too poisonous, the artists and thinkers of society seek alternative spaces britannica.com. In the 21st century, those spaces might be online forums or satirical blogs where anonymity shields the truth-teller. In 3rd-century China, it was a physical retreat to nature, where conversation could flow as freely as the wine. The impulse is the same – to find a **haven for honesty** when the mainstream has no room for it.

With the historical backdrop in place, we can now travel to that quiet estate in Shanyang, where seven figures are gathering under the emerald canopy of bamboo. They bring with them jars of wine, musical instruments, scrolls of poetry, and hearts full of both hope and sorrow. They are about to make history, albeit unknowingly, simply by living life on their own terms.



Chapter 2

Gathering in the Grove

Chapter 2: Gathering in the Grove

In a **secluded village in Shanyang**, tall stalks of bamboo swayed gently in the breeze as if whispering secrets. This idyllic setting belonged to **Ji Kang**, a renowned writer, musician, and alchemist britannica.com. Ji Kang's estate boasted a small bamboo grove that would soon lend its name to the fellowship forming around him. Throughout history, certain places gain fame not for their size or splendor, but for the brilliance of the souls they host – Socrates' Agora, Gertrude Stein's Paris salon, or in this case, Ji Kang's humble grove of bamboo.

They came, one by one or in small groups, **friends seeking refuge with friends**. By the mid-3rd century (around the 240s–250s AD), seven men had informally coalesced into what would later be called the **Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove** britannica.com. The Chinese name *Zhúlín Qīxián* (竹林七賢) literally means “Seven Worthies in the Bamboo Forest,” highlighting how posterity viewed them – as wise worthies rather than rebels or dropouts.

Who were these seven? In brief, they were all highly learned, creative individuals, each with his own flair:

- **Ji Kang (嵇康, 223–262)** – the host. A gifted **poet, musician, and Daoist philosopher**, known for his unyielding integrity and scorn for sycophancy. Ji Kang had once held a minor office but resigned early, preferring a blacksmith’s life in the country over bending the knee at court [sites.asiasociety.org](https://sites.asiasociety.org/sites.asiasociety.org). Tall and strikingly handsome by accounts, he became the charismatic center of the group. Friends likened him to a sleeping dragon – calm but powerful plato.stanford.edu.
- **Ruan Ji (阮籍, 210–263)** – the **poet-musician** whose very name would become synonymous with eccentric genius. Ruan Ji was a few years older than Ji Kang and was already famous for his poetry and his love of wine. He held an honorary rank (Infantry Colonel) but avoided real court commitment. Known to feign drunkenness or madness to dodge political entrapments, he possessed a razor-sharp mind behind a carefree facade [britannica.com](https://britannica.com/britannica.com).
- **Liu Ling (劉伶, c.221–c.300)** – the **merry sage**, author of the celebrated poem-essay “*Ode to the Virtue of Wine*”. Liu Ling embraced a life of bohemian freedom, often seen with a wine gourd in one hand. Legends say he roamed naked at home, proclaiming the universe his dwelling and his modest house his clothing – so why bother with actual clothes? When chastised for his nudity by surprised visitors, Liu Ling quipped, “I take Heaven and Earth as my pillars and roof, and my house as my pants and coat. So what are you gentlemen doing inside my pants?” sites.asiasociety.org This cheeky retort perfectly captures his spirit: utterly unrestrained by social convention.
- **Xiang Xiu (向秀, c.227–c.272)** – the **philosopher and memoirist**. A close friend of Ji Kang, Xiang Xiu was deeply learned in Daoist thought. He later helped compile a famous commentary on the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*, building on Ji Kang’s ideas britannica.com. He also wrote a poignant rhapsody titled “*Reminiscence*” (思舊賦) mourning the loss of friends – a work said to be inspired by the fates of Ji Kang and others dokumen.pub. Thoughtful and gentle, Xiang Xiu represented the reflective side of the group.

- **Shan Tao (山濤, 205–283)** – the **elder statesman turned sage**. Older than most of the others, Shan Tao had been a government official of considerable achievement. In fact, he eventually rose to one of the highest offices in the Jin dynasty (Minister of Education, *situ*) [sites.asiasociety.org](https://sites.asiasociety.org/sites.asiasociety.org). Yet he is counted among the Bamboo Grove band because of his personal friendship with them and shared values. Shan Tao tried to straddle the line between public service and private principle, and his story with Ji Kang – recommending Ji for office only to alienate him – is legendary (more on that in Chapter 3).
- **Ruan Xian (阮咸, 3rd century, d. c. 268?)** – the **musician**. A younger relative or clansman of Ruan Ji, Ruan Xian was known for his mastery of the lute-like *pipa*. He even held minor office (as a Grand Warden) in his later life sites.asiasociety.org. But Ruan Xian’s enduring legacy is musical: a certain moon-shaped lute was later named the “**ruan**” in his honor [britannica.com](https://britannica.com/britannica.com). We can imagine him in the grove plucking gentle melodies on his instrument as others composed impromptu poems. He was quieter in historical records than some others, but clearly cherished in the group for his art.
- **Wang Rong (王戎, 234–305)** – the **young aristocrat**. Wang Rong was considerably younger and known more for his wealth and noble background than for literary or philosophical output britannica.com. He may have been a bit of an outlier in temperament – later in life he rejoined officialdom and prospered under the Jin dynasty. But in his youth he fell under the spell of Ji Kang’s circle, drawn by the allure of their unconventional lifestyle. Wang Rong’s presence shows that even the well-to-do yearned for authenticity beyond the superficial glitter of status.

This diverse collection of personalities formed a **brotherhood of sorts**. What united them was a rejection of what they called the “*dusty world*” of politics – dusty implying defiled or impure – in favor of **pure friendship, nature, art, and frank talk**. They gathered often in Ji Kang’s bamboo grove to drink wine, strum the qin (zither) or pipa, and launch into long conversations about life and the universe. These discussions were likely a mix of witty banter, poetic musing, and serious philosophy. In essence,

they created their own **salon in the wilderness**, far from the eavesdropping ears of spies and informants.

One can easily picture a scene: **Dappled sunlight** filters through the tall bamboo stalks, painting moving patterns on the ground. It is late afternoon. Ruan Ji, cheeks flushed with wine, is laughing as he composes a quatrain on the spot. Xiang Xiu and Ji Kang recline on a rustic bench, debating passages from Laozi's scripture. Liu Ling arrives late (having finished another wine flask at home) and dramatically flings off his outer robe complaining of the heat, to everyone's chuckle. A servant boy brings more wine warmed in a jug. Under a nearby tree, Ruan Xian tunes his instrument, plucking a melody so soulful that it silences the conversation for a moment. Wang Rong, the youth, listens wide-eyed, absorbing the atmosphere of freedom and creativity. In this moment, **they are utterly themselves** – no court etiquette, no pretenses, just seven kindred spirits communing in nature.

It wasn't all idle merriment, of course. These were deep thinkers, and they grappled with serious questions. They spoke of **Daoist concepts like "wúwéi"** (無爲, non-action), trying to reconcile it with their frustration at the world's corruption sites.asiasociety.org. They discussed how to cultivate personal integrity and longevity – Ji Kang even wrote essays on music theory and nurturing life. They wrote poems celebrating the **simple joys of country life** and the fellowship of friends, as well as poems lamenting the cruelty of fate. When they criticized the powers that be, they did so obliquely: through allegory, historical analogy, or humor. A casual outsider reading their poetry might think it purely personal or abstract, but those in the know could see the veiled barbs at warlords and hypocrites britannica.com.

Importantly, the bamboo grove gathering wasn't a formal club or a political cabal. They had no manifestos or agenda beyond mutual support and honest expression. If anything, it was a **retreat into a private utopia** of art and friendship. In turbulent times, creating a small world of order and beauty can be a profound act. The Seven Sages sought to live **authentically**, aligning with Daoist ideals of naturalness (*zìrán*, 自然) and spontaneity. They weren't doctrinaire Daoists, but they drew heavily on Daoist inspiration to justify their withdrawal and hedonistic streak (like enjoying wine without guilt). "Hedonistic escape" is how one scholar

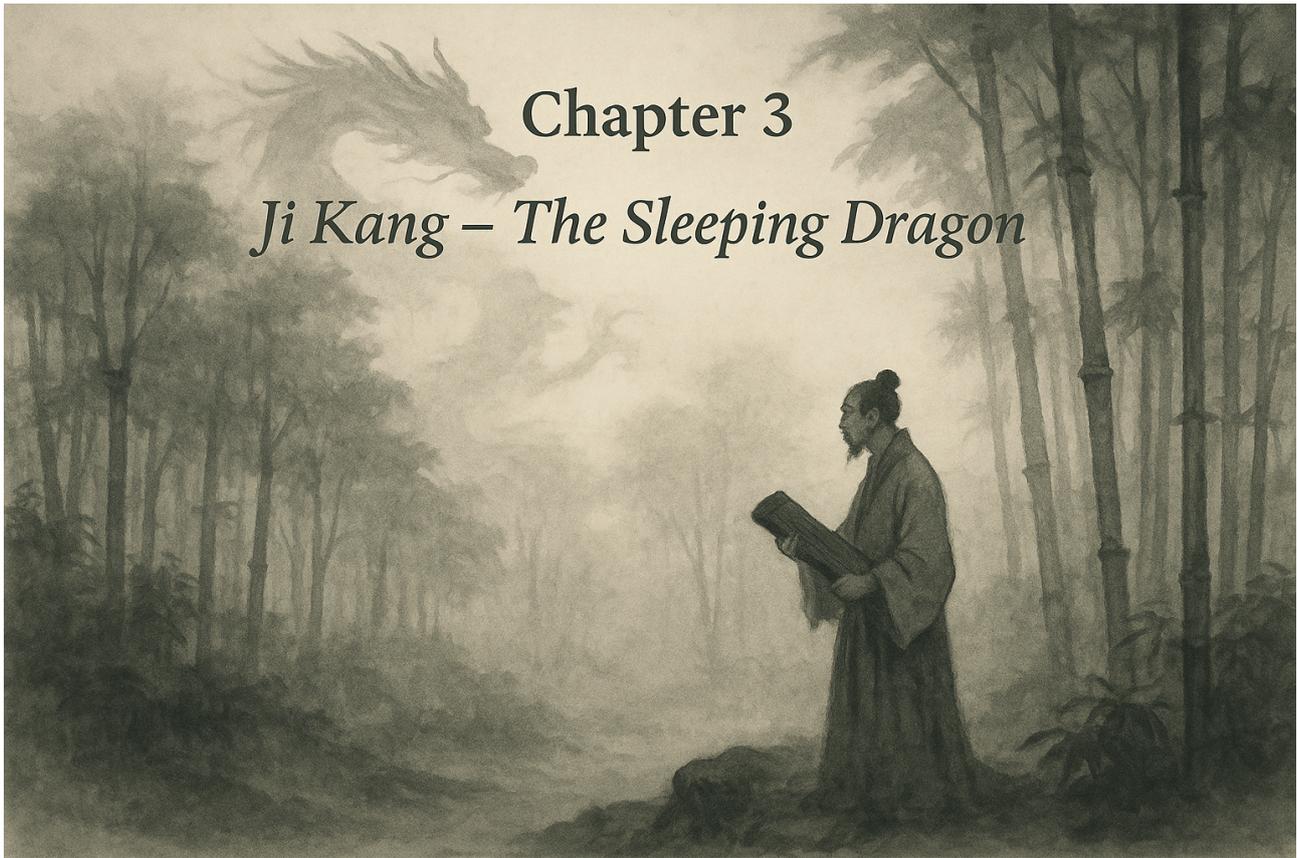
describes their lifestyle – lots of **wine-drinking and verse-writing in the country** as an antidote to court politics britannica.com.

Their retreat, as Britannica notes, was “**typical of the Daoist-oriented qingtan movement**”, meaning it was part of a broader trend among intellectuals of that era britannica.com. But the Seven Sages became the most famous exemplars of that trend, perhaps because of the dramatic stories and works they left behind.

Parallel to this, consider how modern individuals form small communities or circles to **escape the “officialdom” of modern life**. For example, a group of dissident bloggers might meet at a café to share thoughts they could never publish in the state-monitored press, or scientists in a restrictive society might have closed-door “blue sky” sessions to freely explore ideas. Online, people form private forums or chat groups to speak without the fear of institutional retribution. The Bamboo Grove was essentially an **offline analog** of such free spaces. One might even call it an ancient prototype of the anonymous forum: while the sages were not literally anonymous to each other, they were “socially anonymous” in that they had stepped out of the public eye. What they said in the grove, like Vegas, **stayed in the grove**(at least until they encoded it in poetry).

Thus, the gathering in the grove stands as a poignant symbol. It reminds us that when the public square is hostile to truth, the wise will find or create a **bamboo grove** of their own – a place “where Koreans can openly share their honest opinions... without fear of backlash,” as a modern article described online bamboo forests charactermedia.com. For Ji Kang and his friends, the backlash they feared was far more severe than social media comments – it could be exile or execution. That knowledge bonded them even closer. They knew they were, in a sense, **living on borrowed time**, snatching joy and meaning in a brief interlude of peace.

The next chapters will delve into each of the principal sages, to better understand their individual lives, contributions, and how they exemplified the Bamboo Grove ethos. We’ll start with the charismatic host himself, Ji Kang, whose fate would rock the community and reverberate through history.



Chapter 3

Ji Kang – The Sleeping Dragon

Chapter 3: Ji Kang – The Sleeping Dragon

On a chilly autumn morning in the year 262 A.D., in the bustling city of **Luoyang**, a man walked calmly to his place of execution. He was **Ji Kang**, and he met death with the same grace and defiance that had defined his life. According to historical sources, Ji Kang remained serene and unflinching as the axe-man approached. In his final moments, he requested his **qin** (zither) and played one last haunting melody. Thousands of students and admirers had petitioned for his release in vain; now they listened, weeping, as the notes of his zither filled the air. Ji Kang lamented that the music he created would die with him, since no one else knew the piece he had composed plato.stanford.edu. When the final chord faded, the executioner carried out the sentence. Ji Kang was **33** years old and guilty of nothing more than integrity and intellectual independence.

How did it come to this? Ji Kang's execution was a defining moment that underscored exactly why the Seven Sages had fled the court. It showed that even in a bamboo grove, one could not completely escape the long arm of power. To understand Ji Kang's end, we must understand his **character** and the events leading up to that day.

Ji Kang (also romanized as Xi Kang) was born in 223 into a family with some prestige (through marriage ties to the Cao Wei ruling house) plato.stanford.edu. From a young age, he stood out – exceptionally talented in music, literature, and philosophy, and exceptionally **stubborn** in his principles. He despised sycophancy and empty ritual. In the early 250s, Ji Kang secured a minor post in the bureaucracy, but it didn't last long. The story goes that a high-ranking friend, **Shan Tao**, recommended Ji Kang for a significant government position (after Shan himself was moving up). This well-meaning referral backfired disastrously sites.asiasociety.org. Ji Kang felt **betrayed** that Shan Tao would drag him back toward official life when he had renounced it. He wrote a scathing letter to Shan Tao – often referred to as the “Letter of Breaking Off Relations” – essentially **ending their friendship** over this matter. In it, Ji Kang rebuked Shan Tao for not understanding his desire to remain a free hermit. This personal rift would later be exploited by those who wanted Ji Kang gone.

Ji Kang's uncompromising nature made him a folk hero to some and a threat to others. At court, the newly ascendant **Sima clan** (specifically Sima Zhao, regent of Wei) viewed Ji Kang with suspicion. Here was a man with a following of students, a celebrated writer whose essays challenged conventional pieties. One of Ji Kang's famous essays, “*On the Absence of Sentiments in Music*,” took positions that ran against orthodox Confucian views of music's moral role – marking him as an iconoclast. He openly revered Daoist masters like Laozi and Zhuangzi as his “teachers” plato.stanford.edu, implying that mere human Emperors or princes were not on that pedestal. Moreover, Ji Kang was physically imposing and from a good family – potentially a “dragon” who, if angered, could rally opposition. Sima authorities likened him to a “**sleeping dragon**” whose **potential was dangerous** if he ever chose to awaken against them plato.stanford.edu.

The pretext for his arrest came when Ji Kang unwisely gave refuge to a friend who was considered a rebel. The general **Zhong Hui**, an enforcer for the Simas, seized the chance to eliminate Ji Kang. Despite a reported **3,000 student**s signing a petition pleading for Ji Kang's life, the regime was determined to make an example of him plato.stanford.edu. His execution in 262 sent shockwaves – it was as if a pure, high-note had been silenced mid-melody.

Ji Kang's death cemented his legacy as a **martyr for intellectual freedom**. Later scholars and poets revered him for his unwavering integrity and bravery plato.stanford.edu. Whenever Chinese literati felt unjustly persecuted by authority in later eras, they would invoke Ji Kang's memory for inspiration. For instance, during the Ming–Qing transition in the 17th century, many scholar-officials who refused to serve the new Qing (Manchu) rulers admired the Seven Sages as models sites.asiasociety.org. Ji Kang in particular, who died rather than compromise, was held up as a **patron saint of the principled recluse**.

But beyond his dramatic end, Ji Kang's life in the Bamboo Grove was full of intellectual contributions. He wrote some **60 poems** (though fewer survive) and at least **14 essays** on topics ranging from music theory to longevity techniques plato.stanford.edu. One of his most famous writings is the “**Qín fù**” (琴賦) or “**Rhapsody on the Zither**,” a poetic essay praising the guqin zither's construction and the spiritual experience of its music chinesepoetrytranslation.org. In it, Ji Kang waxes lyrical about how the finest instruments are made from choice paulownia wood grown on lofty mountains, crafted with exquisite skill, and how the music can transport the player beyond mundane cares silkqin.com/silkqin.com. This essay reveals Ji Kang's aestheticism and also perhaps an allegory: just as the zither's music expresses what words cannot, the sages used art to express what official discourse would not allow.

He also penned “**Yangsheng Lun**” (養生論, **Essay on Nourishing Life**), in which he advocated for maximizing one's natural lifespan and spiritual well-being through techniques like breathing exercises, special diets, and even medicinal substances plato.stanford.edu plato.stanford.edu. Unlike rigid Confucians who disapproved of Daoist elixir-taking or longevity practices, Ji Kang embraced these as extensions of seeking harmony with the Dao. Underneath, there's a poignant irony: this man concerned with health and longevity had his life cut short. Yet his ideas on cultivating **zìrán**(naturalness) and avoiding emotional disturbance as keys to wellbeing influenced Chinese thought. “Desires are harmful to both body and mind,” he noted in *On Nourishing Life*, whereas purity of being requires the absence of excessive desire or fear plato.stanford.edu. In today's terms, Ji Kang was prescribing a minimalist, *mindful* lifestyle free from the toxic stress of court ambition.

Ji Kang's **personality** in the Grove was described as both fiercely rational and playfully creative. He loved engaging in *qingtan* debates, often taking devil's advocate positions to spark deeper inquiry. He was unafraid to challenge even sacred cows. For example, in one fragment it's noted he **ridiculed Confucian morals and rituals** for fostering hypocrisy. He wrote:

“With the appearance of a ruler, cruelty flourished instantaneously... Rituals and laws are established but people are bound, not free... The powerful ones are ruling and causing outrage, the weak ones are afraid and subservient... They seem disinterested, but in fact they are grasping. On the inside they are insidious, but on the outside they are amiable and polite.” en.wikipedia.org

This thinly veiled critique of the ruling class (from the perspective of Daoist skepticism) shows Ji Kang's boldness. In essence, he said that all the fine rituals and laws of civilization are a sham that enslave people, and that those in power hide their malice behind politeness. Such words, even couched in general terms, would have been explosive if published openly. It's no wonder he preferred the medium of **philosophical essays and allegories** over straightforward political pamphlets.

During his Bamboo Grove days, Ji Kang also practiced what he preached about personal freedom. Anecdotes tell of him working bellows at a forge, forging iron like a common blacksmith, to earn a living outside the court. Imagine a highly educated man with soft scholar's hands choosing manual labor over a cushy bureaucratic post – that was Ji Kang. He detested living off stipends that could become chains. And he famously **valued friendship** above all: when a friend (even one of dubious reputation) was in need, Ji Kang sheltered him despite the risk. Loyalty to his chosen family (the sages and like-minded peers) trumped loyalty to any emperor. This camaraderie would be reciprocated – we will see Xiang Xiu and Ruan Ji mourning him in their writings after his execution, their hearts heavy with the “impossibility of palace life for the scholar” that Ji Kang's fate so tragically illustrated [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com).

Ji Kang's story underscores a key theme of the Bamboo Grove: **speaking truth to power from a position of detachment**. He tried to live detached from power, yet his truths still provoked the powerful. In a way, he pushed

the boundary further than any of the others, and he paid dearly. In modern parallel, one might think of a courageous whistleblower or outspoken dissident on social media – someone who, despite trying to remain safe behind anonymity or distance, still gets targeted by the state. Ji Kang's fate is a sobering reminder that even safe havens have limits when confronted by authoritarian might.

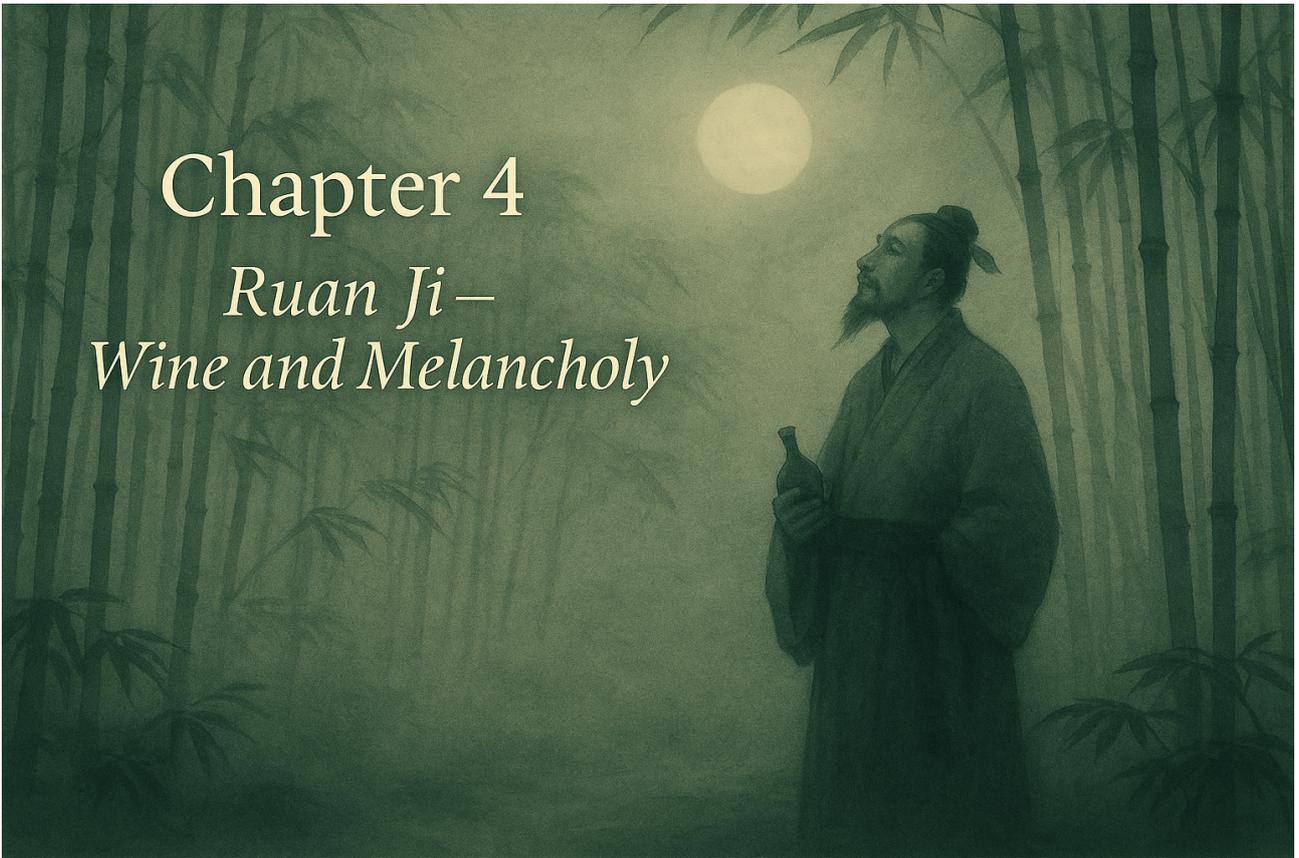
For the surviving sages, Ji Kang's martyrdom was both a warning and a source of eternal inspiration. It was a warning that even in a bamboo grove one must sometimes **hold one's tongue** or at least disguise one's meaning artfully. But it was also inspiration because Ji Kang showed it was possible to face death without compromising one's principles. The tune he strummed before dying – often referred to as the *Guangling San* melody – became legendary, a symbol of **defiant beauty in the face of tyranny** plato.stanford.edu.

In later eras, artists painted scenes of the Seven Sages with Ji Kang often depicted as the central figure, sometimes with a qin in hand. The drama of his end gave the Bamboo Grove an added mystique: they were no mere pleasure-seekers, but men who would die for their ideals if pressed. As we leave Ji Kang's story, we sense the bittersweet aura it casts on the group – their merry conversations always shadowed by the knowledge that the world they fled was still out there, dangerous and looming.

Now we turn to Ji Kang's closest friend in spirit, who outlived him by only a year. If Ji Kang was the **unyielding sword**, then **Ruan Ji** was the **subtle flute** – softer in approach but equally resonant.

Chapter 4

Ruan Ji – Wine and Melancholy



Chapter 4: Ruan Ji – Wine and Melancholy

In the Bamboo Grove tapestry, **Ruan Ji** (阮籍) is the figure painted in shades of dusk and autumn – a man of **melancholy poetry and wine-soaked wisdom**. He was often called “*Wine-mad Ruan*” for his legendary capacity to drink, yet his intoxication concealed a keen awareness of the sorrow and absurdity of his times. Ruan Ji was the **most famous of the Seven Sages** in literature, celebrated for his poignant poems that captured the heartache of a world gone astray britannica.com.

Born in 210 AD, Ruan Ji was older than Ji Kang by over a decade. He lived through the chaotic final years of the Han dynasty as a child and came of age during the Three Kingdoms period. His father had been an esteemed poet in the *Jian’an* literary circle under the Cao family’s patronage en.wikipedia.org. Thus, Ruan Ji inherited a mantle of literary prestige. But with that came a dilemma: his family was loyal to the Cao Wei, yet as the Sima faction grew powerful, loyalty became a liability en.wikipedia.org. Ruan Ji learned early that speaking boldly could attract dangerous attention – a lesson that would shape his peculiar survival strategy.

Ruan Ji's strategy was **brilliant in its madness**: he cultivated a reputation as an eccentric drunkard to avoid being seen as a political threat en.wikipedia.org. “The safety of Ruan Ji during his life seems to have been underwritten by his willingness to be labeled a drunk and an eccentric,” one historian notes en.wikipedia.org. He wore the mask of Bacchus so that the powerful would not force him into their schemes. On at least two notable occasions, this saved him:

- Once, the regent **Sima Zhao** (who effectively ruled Wei) considered marrying his own son (the future Emperor Sima Yan) to Ruan Ji's daughter – a politically “advantageous” alliance for Ruan's family. Ruan Ji found this prospect dangerous; tying oneself to the Sima clan could backfire if fortunes changed. Instead of directly refusing (which he couldn't safely do), Ruan Ji **feigned an extended bout of drunken insanity**. He stayed thoroughly intoxicated for **sixty days straight**, rendering himself incapable of giving consent or holding talks britannica.com/britannica.com. By the end of those two months, the embarrassed would-be in-laws dropped the proposal. Ruan Ji's ploy had worked: by acting the clown, he sidestepped a deadly trap britannica.com.
- On another occasion, during a purge of dissenters, Ruan Ji was suspected of harboring disloyal thoughts. Whenever officials came to interrogate or entrap him, he would greet them dead drunk, slurring nonsensical poetry, thereby convincing them he was **too inebriated to plot anything**. “Whenever Zhong Hui sought to have him convicted of a crime, Ruan Ji would escape punishment by becoming drunk,” recounts one source chinaheritagequarterly.org. It's as if he had a personal defense mechanism: *Intoxicate Self – Danger passes*.

Underneath this calculated facade, Ruan Ji was deeply anguished by the state of the world. His most famous literary work is a collection of **82 poems** often titled “*Yǒnghuái Shī*” (詠懷詩), translated as “*Songs of My Heart*” or “*Poems of My Thoughts*”. In these verses, he pours out his feelings on everything from the fickleness of fortune to the pain of living under an oppressive regime. His style is rich in **imagery and allusion**, often using scenes of nature to mirror his inner emotions. One prominent theme is **sorrowful reclusion** – the feeling of being a lonely honest man in a corrupt world, akin to a wild goose separated from the flock.

Consider the opening lines of one of Ruan Ji's well-known poems, as translated by scholars Jerome Ch'en and Michael Bullock:

*“Being sleepless at midnight,
I rise to play the lute.
The moon is visible through the curtains,
And a gentle breeze sways the cords of my robe.
A lonely wild goose cries in the wilderness
And is echoed by birds in the woods.
As it circles, it gazes
At me, alone, imbued with sadness.”* en.wikipedia.org

In these lines, Ruan Ji paints a midnight scene where **nature itself seems to echo his loneliness**. The solitary wild goose's cry, the gentle moonlit breeze – all set a tone of elegant desolation. He is awake with heavy thoughts while others sleep; the imagery of the goose gazing at him underscores his feeling of being a kindred spirit to that lone creature, “imbued with sadness.” This poem encapsulates the mood of much of Ruan's poetry – haunting, reflective, tinged with an existential sorrow.

Critics through the ages have praised Ruan Ji's poems for their **“profound view of a troubled time,”** as Britannica puts it britannica.com. They are not overtly didactic or satirical; rather, they induce a thoughtful melancholy that subtly **strengthens one's spirit** by confronting impermanence and injustice. It was said that reading Ruan's verses could fortify one's character while also moving one to tear en.wikipedia.org. His unique voice blended a Daoist sense of the transience of life with a very human yearning for meaning.

Ruan Ji also wrote notable **essays**, including philosophical treatises such as “Discourse on Understanding the *Yijing* (Book of Changes),” “Discourse on Music,” and others en.wikipedia.org. His essay “*Dà Rén Xián Shēng Zhuàn*” (The Biography of Great Man – sometimes called “*The Life of a Great Man*”) is particularly intriguing. In it, through the figure of an unnamed hermit-sage, Ruan Ji expresses his deepest ideals. He describes this Great Man as one who wanders freely, unbound by time and space:

“Ten thousand li were for him as one step, a thousand years as one morning. He pursued nothing, halted at nothing; he was in search of the Great Dao and found shelter nowhere... Egoists scold and abuse him,

fools reproach him, but no one understood the subtle wanderings of his spirit. The old man did not abandon his quest, despite being the bewilderment of a society that mocked him... en.wikipedia.org

This reads almost as a self-portrait of Ruan Ji (and by extension, perhaps Ji Kang and the others too) – a wanderer after truth, misunderstood by the masses. The hermit figure is unattached to worldly concerns (ten thousand *li*, a huge distance, feels like a mere step to him; a millennium passes like a morning). It's a poetic way of saying the Great Man operates on a different plane of values. Meanwhile, petty people jeer at him, but he perseveres, true to himself. This passage sheds light on how Ruan Ji saw the **scholar-recluse**: as someone journeying through life in tune with the Dao, not with society's expectations.

Ruan Ji did **express open criticism** of hypocrisy, though often cloaked. Another excerpt attributed to his writings hits sharply at the social ills of his day:

“Cheating the ignorant, duping simple people, hiding knowledge to seem wise... The powerful ones cause outrage, the weak ones cower. ... If [an act is deemed] a crime – they show no remorse; if they get lucky – they indulge in no moderation...” en.wikipedia.org

Lines like these, peppered through his essays and poems, show Ruan Ji railing against the two-faced nature of the elite and the injustice in society, albeit in a generalized manner. They also reflect a **pessimism**: a sense that the world is inevitably full of such vice. Hence his retreat into the solace of **wine and art**.

Speaking of wine – Ruan Ji's drunkenness was not merely an act, it was also a genuine refuge for him. One of his famous pieces is the musical composition “**Jiukuang**” (酒狂) meaning “**Drunken Ecstasy**” or literally “Wine-Madness”. It's said he composed this guqin melody to celebrate the feeling of carefree intoxication en.wikipedia.org. In Ruan's view, wine could be a means to achieve a state of naturalness and unconstraint (*zìrán*) where the spirit could roam free. This was quite a departure from Confucian propriety, which frowned on excessive drinking. But Ruan Ji elevated drinking almost to a philosophical statement – a deliberate *hedonistic escape* that signaled rejection of a joyless, oppressive reality [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com).

Despite his bouts of revelry, Ruan Ji was **never truly oblivious**. There's a poignant anecdote: when Ruan's mother died, even during the funeral he continued to drink heavily, which was a shocking breach of Confucian mourning etiquette plato.stanford.edu. Some saw it as impiety; others suspected it was his way of numbing unbearable grief or perhaps performing a final act of rebellion against societal norms that even grief could not make him embrace. The complexity of Ruan Ji lies in such contradictions – he was deeply emotional yet could appear unfeeling, utterly cynical about society yet capable of profound empathy in his writings.

Ruan Ji passed away in 263 A.D., reportedly from illness (though one wonders if his **lifestyle of heavy drinking** contributed). He was 53. In the end, he was one of the luckier ones – he died a natural death, having managed the tightrope walk of **staying alive under a tyranny** by using wit and wine as his balancing pole. The Jin dynasty was founded only a couple of years later; had he lived longer, it's uncertain whether he'd have found a place in the new order or continued his hermit ways.

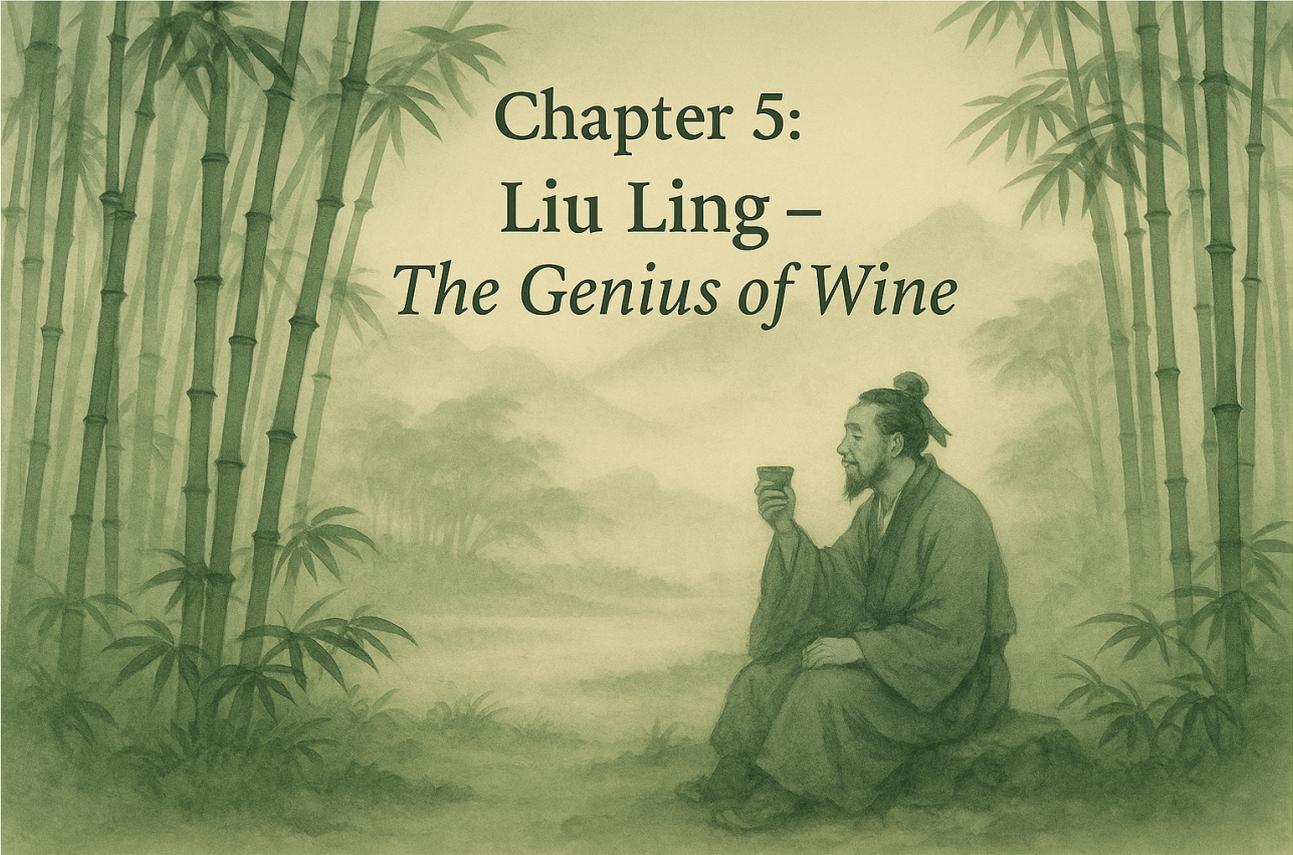
The legacy of Ruan Ji is immense in Chinese poetry. Later generations in troubled times often turned to his *Yonghua* poems to find resonance. For example, **Li Bai** in the Tang dynasty and other poets who experienced political exile admired Ruan's ability to express sorrow so beautifully. In art, Ruan Ji is often depicted as a figure with a flask, perhaps singing or lost in thought, eyes hinting at both mirth and sadness.

For the Seven Sages as a group, Ruan Ji was like the emotional core – the one whose poetry gave voice to their collective disillusionment and longing. If Ji Kang's execution demonstrated the *external* dangers they all fled, Ruan Ji's verses illustrated the *internal* turmoil – the heartache of wise men living in a foolish age.

Modern parallels: Ruan Ji's way of coping – **satirical pretense and private lament** – can be seen in many intellectuals under repressive regimes. Think of an outspoken journalist who, under censorship, resorts to writing cryptically or humorously to slip criticism past the censors, all the while drowning sorrows in a drink at day's end. Online, one might imagine a blogger who posts under a playful pseudonym, acting like a joker to reveal serious truths (the way a court jester might). That blogger

might pen melancholic posts about the state of society that strike a chord with readers feeling similarly helpless. Ruan Ji would recognize these modern “wine-mad” truth-tellers as kindred spirits. They, like him, perform a delicate dance: to speak truth, but slant; to scream into the void, yet laugh as if it’s all a game.

With Ruan Ji’s story told, we move to another sage who took a more *earthy* approach to enlightenment – the irrepressible **Liu Ling**, who seemingly found nirvana at the bottom of a wine cup and wasn’t ashamed to tell the world about it.

The image is a traditional Chinese ink wash painting. It depicts a man with a beard and a topknot, wearing a dark robe, sitting on a rock in a bamboo grove. He is holding a small cup to his lips, as if drinking. The background is filled with tall bamboo stalks and misty, hazy mountains, creating a serene and contemplative atmosphere. The overall color palette is muted, with various shades of green and brown.

Chapter 5: Liu Ling – *The Genius of Wine*

Chapter 5: Liu Ling – The Genius of Wine

In the constellation of the Seven Sages, **Liu Ling** (劉伶) shines as the most colorful and unabashedly hedonistic star. If the Bamboo Grove was about freedom, Liu Ling embodied **freedom from inhibitions**. He is best known for his love affair with alcohol – not as mere indulgence, but as a philosophy of life. Where others cloaked their dissent in metaphor, Liu Ling’s strategy was more straightforward: he decided *nothing* was more important than enjoying his wine and being true to himself, societal opinions be damned.

Liu Ling lived approximately from 221 to 300 AD (sources aren’t precise on his death). He hailed from a humble background and had a personality that one could describe as **merry, blunt, and unaffected**. In many anecdotes, he comes off as the comic relief of the group – yet beneath the humor lies a pointed critique of social pretension.

His signature piece of writing is the short essay-poem “**Jiǔ Dé Sòng**” (酒德頌), often translated as “*In Praise of the Virtue of Wine*” or “*Ode to Alcohol*”. In this work, Liu Ling extols the blissful state that wine grants him and satirizes those who scorn drinking. He presents an almost

quip: “*Heaven and Earth are my pillars and roof, the rooms of my house are my pants and coat. So what are you doing in my pants?*”

sites.asiasociety.org. It’s a cheeky and profound answer rolled into one. He essentially says: I see the entire universe as my true dwelling and my clothes; by barging in and demanding I wear ‘proper’ clothes, *you* are intruding on my cosmic inner privacy! The audacity of flipping the situation like that left the busybodies speechless – and modern readers amused. In an almost Zen-like way, Liu Ling asserts a perspective where human conventions (like clothing indoors) are trivial compared to the grander scheme of nature.

This rebellious individualism of Liu Ling, framed humorously, endeared him to later audiences. He became a **folk hero for anyone who ever felt fed up with decorum and make-believe virtue**. The phrase “Liu Ling’s wine gourd” became symbolic of a carefree life. There’s even an idiom in Chinese, “*drunk like Liu Ling*,” to describe someone contentedly inebriated and oblivious to the world’s fuss.

However, one shouldn’t think Liu Ling was just a buffoon. His **Ode to Wine** is actually quite artful and laced with learned references. He was as educated as his peers, capable of engaging in the same Daoist debates. It’s just that he chose to express wisdom through a simpler, everyman stance. In a sense, he democratized the Bamboo Grove ethos: not everyone can write deep metaphysical treatises, but anyone can raise a cup and toast to freedom. By exalting wine, he was also celebrating *spontaneity, friendship, and unfiltered emotion* – key ingredients of a life well-lived, in his eyes.

One line attributed to him goes: “*I ask not for the joys of Heaven, only for wine in the cup*”. Another, in the context of forgetting one’s worries, says: “*After all, no wine ever reached Liu Ling’s grave.*” This latter is a sobering reminder that even the greatest drinker meets mortality, and wine cannot literally banish sorrow permanently. It hints at an undercurrent of existential reflection: if life is short and filled with suffering, why not soften the edges with a bit of liquid comfort? It’s a sentiment many around the world have shared in hard times.

In the Bamboo Grove gatherings, Liu Ling likely played the role of the jester sage – the one who might crack jokes when discussions grew too morose, or perform a comedic skit mimicking some stuffy court official.

One can imagine him coaxing a laugh from a pensive Ruan Ji or pouring Ji Kang another cup to get him to relax for a night. Importantly, though, the others respected him. They didn't see him as a clown but as someone who had achieved a kind of spiritual ease they all craved. Liu Ling often declared that wine was his teacher; in being constantly a little drunk, he found it easier to speak from the heart.

From a modern perspective, Liu Ling might be akin to the friend who says “forget the nonsense, let's grab a beer and be real.” He's that figure who resists the rat race, living minimally (all he needs is wine and maybe a trusty servant to carry his jug – indeed, tales mention he traveled with a servant whose sole duty was to lug wine and a shovel to bury him if he literally drank himself to death on the spot en.wikisource.org!). That morbid detail – instructing that if he dies drunk, just bury him then and there – underscores his **complete surrender to fate and pleasure**.

There is an undeniably **therapeutic aspect** to Liu Ling's approach. A Korean writer reflecting on “bamboo forests” noted that having someone to vent to can prevent depression or illness, functioning as a safety valve for pent-up frustrations brunch.co.kr. Liu Ling's constant vent (his *bamboo grove* in a sense) was the wine cup and the receptive ears of his friends. In modern parallels, one might think of the role of humor and partying under oppressive circumstances. Comedians who joke about political issues provide relief and subtle criticism. Social gatherings where people can “let loose” often become forums of truth – as the Latin saying goes, *In vino veritas* (“in wine, there is truth”). Online, this could equate to people creating humorous memes about serious issues as a way to cope and resist. Liu Ling was a progenitor of that spirit: he confronted a repressive reality not by direct confrontation, but by *mocking it through his lifestyle* – becoming the living antithesis of everything the solemn, power-hungry lords stood for.

He lived to an old age (if we accept he died around 300, he would be nearly 80, which is remarkable and perhaps the highest age among the seven). Perhaps his **laissez-faire attitude** contributed to his longevity – free of stress, full of joy, he simply outlasted many who schemed and worried themselves to an early grave. We might also note that by the time Jin dynasty was stable, someone like Liu Ling was no political threat; he

could be tolerated as an eccentric. Thus he likely passed his later years peacefully (and probably tipsy).

Liu Ling's legacy is the reminder that **there is wisdom in laughter and simplicity**. His presence in the Bamboo Grove pantheon ensures that the narrative isn't all high-brow gloom. It adds a human, earthy dimension. The Seven Sages weren't just stern philosophers—they were people who also knew how to live in the moment and find mirth amid hardship.

With Liu Ling's story told, we turn to the remaining members of the group – each less famous individually, but together they round out the picture of the Bamboo Grove fellowship. Xiang Xiu, Shan Tao, Ruan Xian, and Wang Rong each contribute a piece to the puzzle of what this group stood for and how they navigated the times.



Chapter 6: Kindred Spirits – Xiang Xiu, Shan Tao, Ruan Xian, and Wang Rong

Beyond the three luminaries we've profiled (Ji Kang, Ruan Ji, Liu Ling), the **Bamboo Grove** had four other sages whose roles, though quieter, are essential to the story. They present a spectrum of approaches to the central conflict between personal integrity and societal duty. Let's meet these **kindred spirits** and see how each balanced (or struggled with) the recluse ideal.

Xiang Xiu (向秀, ca. 227–ca. 272): The Philosopher and Friend.

Xiang Xiu was, in many ways, the reflective heart of the group. A younger contemporary of Ruan Ji and Ji Kang, he shared their philosophical bent and was particularly close to Ji Kang. In fact, he outlived Ji Kang by only about a decade, and much of what we know about Ji Kang's thinking is thanks to Xiang Xiu. He took it upon himself to **write a memoir of Ji Kang** after his execution, preserving his friend's sayings and character for posterity sites.asiasociety.org.

Philosophically, Xiang Xiu was engaged deeply with **Daoist thought**. He is credited (along with a thinker named **Guo Xiang**) with compiling and commenting on the text of the **Zhuangzi**, one of Daoism's core classics britannica.com. The *Zhuangzi* is a book full of parables emphasizing relativism, naturalness, and freedom from conventions – themes that fit perfectly with the Bamboo Grove ethos. Xiang Xiu's commentary would become the **most influential interpretation** of Zhuangzi in Chinese history, suggesting that his insights were profound. For example, one concept in Zhuangzi is that of the “**perfected man**” who wanders free and easy beyond mundane concerns; undoubtedly, Xiang Xiu and his peers saw a bit of themselves in that archetype.

Xiang Xiu's own writing includes the piece “*Si Jiū Fù*” (思舊賦), translated as “*Rhapsody on Recalling Old Friends*” or “*Reminiscence*.” This was essentially an **elegy for lost companionship**, believed to lament Ji Kang and maybe Ruan Ji as well dokumen.pub. Though the full text is seldom quoted in English, one scholar noted that Xiang Xiu's expression of missing his friends was “deep and special” – as heartfelt as, say, the great Tang poet Du Fu's sadness at being separated from his friend asset.library.wisc.edu. In other words, Xiang Xiu poured genuine emotion into this rhapsody, capturing the void left by his sages who departed too soon. We can imagine lines describing how the bamboo grove feels empty now, the wine cups gathering dust, the pure conversations now echoes of the past. Through this, Xiang Xiu gives voice to the **cost of their idealism**: to lose friends to exile, to execution, or simply to time, is the bitter flip side of standing apart from a corrupt world.

Interestingly, Xiang Xiu did not completely reject other viewpoints. One anecdote suggests he penned a **refutation of Ji Kang's “Nourishing Life” essay**, to which Ji Kang replied in defense sites.asiasociety.org. This shows that among the sages there was healthy debate – they didn't just sit around agreeing with each other. Xiang Xiu might have taken a slightly more moderate stance, questioning some extremes of Ji Kang's philosophy. This dynamic of internal critique would have kept their intellectual life vigorous. It also foreshadows how later, after Ji Kang's martyrdom, Xiang Xiu found a way to contribute to society (through scholarship like the Zhuangzi commentary) while still **honoring the values of the Grove**.

Sadly, Xiang Xiu's own life was cut short around the age of 45 (if the 272 date is correct). We don't know the cause – possibly illness. But notably, he **did not die violently**, and by the time of his death, the new Jin dynasty was in power. Perhaps he found a slightly safer niche in those later years, focusing on writing rather than politics. He stands as a figure of **contemplation and loyalty**, the friend who loyally documented Ji Kang's life and carried the torch of their ideas after others were gone.

Shan Tao (山濤, 205–283): The Bridge Between Grove and Court.

Shan Tao was unique among the Seven Sages: he was an **established government official** and considerably older than most of the others (born 205, so about 18 years older than Ji Kang). He had a foot in both worlds – the eremitic circle of friends and the bureaucracy of the Jin dynasty. In fact, Shan Tao eventually rose to one of the top three ministerial positions in the country (the *Situ*, or Minister of Education) sites.asiasociety.org. How did someone so deeply involved in officialdom become part of this rebel band?

Shan Tao's early friendship with Ji Kang and Ruan Ji likely formed when he, too, was disillusioned by the late Wei corruption. It's said that Shan Tao helped gather these friends as “refugees of the system”

chinasimplified.com. He was the eldest, possibly a mentor figure.

However, Shan Tao's personality was more pragmatic than Ji Kang's. He believed perhaps that one could still effect positive change from within the system – or at least that one could not entirely escape it. This difference in outlook led to the famous fallout with Ji Kang: by nominating Ji Kang for office, Shan Tao revealed his belief that his talented friend *ought* to serve the state. But Ji Kang saw it as a betrayal of their ideals

sites.asiasociety.org.

That incident “irrevocably damaged their friendship” sites.asiasociety.org.

We can imagine Shan Tao's heartbreak – he likely thought he was doing Ji Kang a favor, offering him a chance to exert influence or at least gain security. Instead, Ji Kang's scathing rejection painted him as someone who “did not understand” the rejection of governmental service. In truth, Shan Tao did understand the issues; he just chose a different path to cope with them.

After Ji Kang's death, Shan Tao continued in government under the Jin. Perhaps he reasoned that he could best honor his fallen friend by being an incorruptible official. And indeed, records show Shan Tao was respected for his fairness and administrative skill. He never turned against the memory of his bamboo grove days – he simply compartmentalized. One might say he practiced a kind of *inner reclusion* even as he sat in an office: staying true in spirit to his values while outwardly performing duties. This is analogous to people today who work within a system they dislike, trying quietly to improve it or at least to mitigate its harms, all the while longing for a simpler life.

There's a tangible example of how the Seven Sages motif resonated with people like Shan Tao's later counterparts: during the Ming-Qing transition (17th century), some officials who reluctantly served the new Qing dynasty comforted themselves with art depicting the Seven Sages sites.asiasociety.org. They saw in those ancient recluses a mirror of their own conflicted souls. Shan Tao, in retrospect, can represent those who *cannot completely opt out* but maintain a kinship with the outsiders.

Notably, Shan Tao lived until 283, witnessing both the triumph of the Jin unification and the early signs of its decay. He died peacefully, full of honors. Traditional accounts consider him one of the sages despite his different trajectory, highlighting that the essence of being a Bamboo Sage was not about literal withdrawal but about a mindset of **purity and loyalty to friends**. Shan Tao, by championing and later mourning Ji Kang, fulfilled that role.

Ruan Xian (阮咸, lived in the 3rd century, d. around 268 or later): The Musician with a Namesake Instrument.

Ruan Xian was a somewhat enigmatic member of the group. He was kin to Ruan Ji (perhaps a cousin or nephew) and clearly shared the family talent for music. Descriptions call him a man of few words but deep notes – his **musicianship spoke for him**. He played a short-necked lute, the *Qin pipa*, so masterfully that people later associated that instrument with him. By the Tang dynasty, the instrument was renamed “**ruanxian**” (阮咸) in his honor, and today it's simply called the **ruan** britannica.com. This lasting tribute tells us that in gatherings he must have often been the one to set the mood with music – whether it was plaintive melodies to accompany Ruan Ji's poetry or lively tunes to lighten Liu Ling's revelry.

Ruan Xian did hold some positions in the Jin government: he served as a **Junior Chamberlain and a Grand Warden** in his later life sites.asiasociety.org. These were mid-level posts, indicating that unlike Ji Kang or Ruan Ji, Ruan Xian eventually reintegrated into society to a degree. Perhaps because he was younger, by the time he matured the worst of the Wei-Jin transition was over, making it easier to serve without moral compromise. Or maybe he simply was more easygoing about service as long as he could still play his music.

Little personal anecdotes survive about Ruan Xian. But one can imagine him as the mellow presence among more fiery personalities. He is often depicted in art carrying or playing his **ruan (lute)**, contributing harmony. In fact, an old analysis of the Seven Worthies' characters says: "Ruan Xian's subtlety could be discerned in his musicianship; drunkenness hid Ruan Ji's brilliance and Liu Ling's essence..." en.wikipedia.org. So Ruan Xian's subtlety (wei) was expressed through music – implying he might have been a man of refined, perhaps slightly introverted temperament, who channeled feelings into melody rather than speech.

He died around the same time as Xiang Xiu (some sources say 268, others slightly later). It's notable that none of the sages who lived into the stable Jin era were persecuted – a testament to the fact that their retreat had perhaps succeeded to an extent: they **outlasted** the most dangerous period. Ruan Xian's legacy, beyond the instrument named after him, is the idea that art (in his case, music) is a **refuge and expression** as important as poetry or philosophy. His presence rounds out the group's portrait – reminding us that the Bamboo Grove valued the arts holistically, not just writing.

Wang Rong (王戎, 234–305): The Wealthy Prodigy Turned Official.

Wang Rong was the youngest of the Seven Sages and in some ways the most puzzling inclusion. He came from a rich aristocratic family and was still a teenager when he fraternized with the older sages like Ruan Ji and Ji Kang. One imagines a youth impressed by these cool, rebellious uncles who didn't behave like typical nobles. Wang Rong joined their circle, perhaps providing resources (maybe he brought excellent wine courtesy of his family's funds!). The Britannica entry notes that Wang Rong was "known mainly for his wealth" britannica.com, implying he wasn't primarily a writer or thinker of note compared to the rest.

As time passed, Wang Rong took a very different path. When the Jin dynasty was established, he embraced it. He served in high positions and became quite influential, at one point even part of the ruling elite's inner circle during regencies in the volatile years after Jin's founding. Historically, he's known as one of the so-called "Twenty-Four Friends" of a prominent Jin prince, indicating his deep embedment in establishment. It seems Wang Rong "grew out" of the carefree hermit stage into a consummate politician.

So why is he counted among the Seven Sages? Possibly because during his formative years, he **shared in their retreat and values**, and later historians found it convenient to keep the classic number seven for symmetry. Or maybe, even as an official, Wang Rong carried a piece of the bamboo grove in his heart. There is an illustrative story from his official days: Once, while strolling in a garden, Wang Rong saw a cluster of brilliantly purple mushrooms and remarked, "*They look like the **purple mushrooms of Mount Shang**.*" Mount Shang was a mythical place of hermits. This cryptic comment suggested that even amid luxury, he hadn't forgotten the imagery of reclusion sites.asiasociety.org. Some interpret it as him momentarily yearning for the simple hermit life he tasted in youth.

Wang Rong lived long and died in 305. By then, the Jin dynasty was in disarray (shortly after, it plunged into civil war). Perhaps he was lucky to exit when he did. In a poetic sense, one might say *the wheel turned*: the youngest sage who once learned from greybeards like Shan Tao and Ruan Ji ended up enduring to see a new troubled time for which later recluses would again look to the Seven Sages as models.

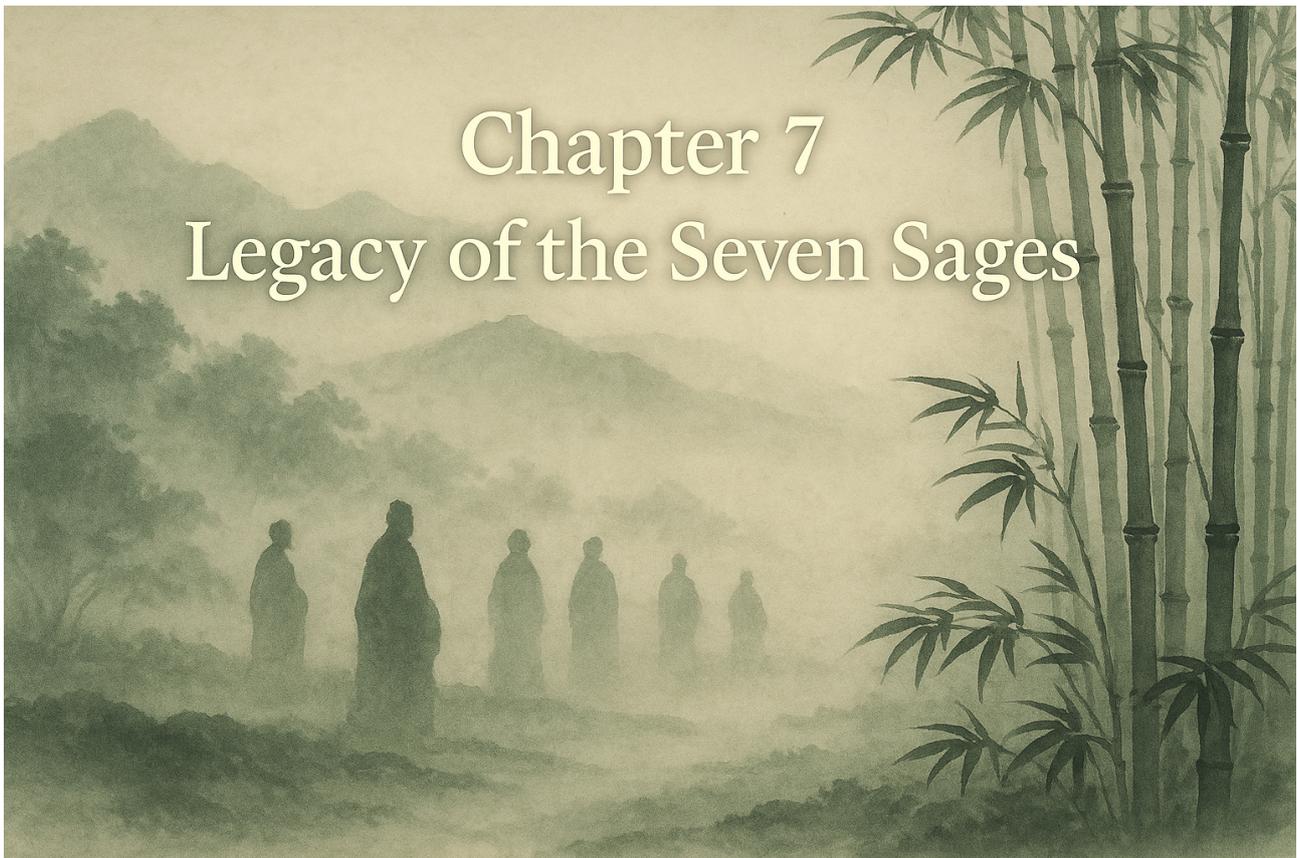
His inclusion in the group's legacy is important, because it shows the **range of outcomes** for the educated men of that era: from martyr (Ji Kang) to hermit-poet (Ruan Ji) to part-time recluse (Xiang Xiu, Ruan Xian) to successful official (Shan Tao, Wang Rong). Yet, despite these divergent fates, all seven are remembered collectively for a shared spirit of camaraderie and candor that flourished in the bamboo grove. It tells us that the Bamboo Grove was not a rigid doctrine or sect – it was a fellowship. And that fellowship left an imprint on each member, even if they later went separate ways.

In sum, the "other" sages highlight certain facets:

- **Intellectual loyalty and legacy (Xiang Xiu)** – preserving and continuing the thoughts of the group.
- **Pragmatic integrity (Shan Tao)** – trying to reconcile moral integrity with practical governance.
- **Artistic subtlety (Ruan Xian)** – using music as the soul’s language when words fail.
- **Youthful assimilation (Wang Rong)** – the next generation’s brush with idealism before engaging the world.

For a modern analogy, consider a circle of college friends who were radical idealists in their early 20s. As years pass, one stays an activist scholar, another joins and tries to reform the corporate world from within, another expresses their ideals through art and music, and yet another ends up a wealthy entrepreneur who fondly recalls those idealistic days. They might reunite at times, reminisce about the “old days” when they dreamed big and laughed in dingy cafés (their version of the grove), and draw strength from that memory. The Seven Sages – including Xiang Xiu, Shan Tao, Ruan Xian, and Wang Rong – similarly had that unbreakable bond formed in youth, which carried through their divergent adult paths.

With all seven individuals explored, we can step back and look at their **collective legacy**. What impact did the Seven Sages have on culture and later generations? And how does their retreat resonate with patterns we see through history and even in today's world? The next chapter will address those questions.



Chapter 7: Legacy of the Seven Sages

Not long after their time, the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove passed into the realm of **legend**. Their names and images were celebrated by those who came after, especially in times of turmoil that echoed the sages' own era. Let's examine how their legacy manifested in various facets of culture and how their example served as a model for others.

Literary Influence: The direct writings of the Seven Sages – the poems of Ruan Ji, the essays of Ji Kang, Liu Ling's ode, Xiang Xiu's commentary, etc. – became part of the classical canon studied by scholars in subsequent dynasties. Their works were quoted and anthologized as examples of *Jin dynasty literature*, noted for its emotional depth and philosophical sophistication. For instance, Ruan Ji's melancholic style influenced later Chinese poetry in the **Six Dynasties and Tang period**, when exploring one's innermost feelings in verse became more accepted. His concept of mixing sorrow with beauty prefigured the great Tang poets like Li Bai and Du Fu. Ji Kang's fearless essays set a precedent for literati to use prose as a medium of free thought, albeit carefully.

Eremitic Tradition: Perhaps their greatest legacy is how they became **symbols of scholarly reclusion**. Chinese history is cyclical with periods of unity and chaos. In each troubled age – be it the late Tang upheavals of the 9th century, the Mongol conquest of the 13th century, or the Ming-Qing transition of the 17th century – many scholars faced the same dilemma: to serve a regime they saw as illegitimate/corrupt or to withdraw. The Seven Sages offered a noble template for withdrawal. They showed that stepping back didn't mean inactivity; it could mean cultivating culture in private, preserving one's principles so that one could **“return” to save society's soul later** (or at least inspire future generations).

For example, after the Ming dynasty fell in 1644 and the Manchu-led Qing took over, some Ming loyalists refused to collaborate and instead turned to painting, poetry, and antiquarian studies in self-imposed rural exile. These men explicitly linked themselves to the Bamboo Grove tradition. They collected art that depicted the Seven Sages, hung them in their studios as daily reminders of integrity. The Asia Society notes that in the **Ming-Qing transition**, the Seven Sages motif appealed strongly to scholar-officials who struggled to remain faithful to their convictions during regime change sites.asiasociety.org. Owning a brush pot or incense burner decorated with the Seven Sages (which were popular then) was almost a statement of one's stance – identifying with those ancient worthies who chose principle over position.

Artistic Motif: Indeed, in the visual arts, the Seven Sages became an enduring subject. The earliest images of them appeared in the **5th century** (only a generation or two after the actual people), on carved tomb bricks of the Northern Wei dynasty sites.asiasociety.org. These probably served to invoke the cultural refinement and defiance of the sages as a protective or aspirational symbol for the tomb's occupant.

As centuries went on, countless **paintings, porcelain designs, woodblock prints, and even carvings** featured the Seven Sages enjoying themselves in a bamboo grove. A typical depiction might show:

- Two sages playing the board game **weiqi** (Go) – representing strategic thought or camaraderie sites.asiasociety.org.
- One sage (often Ji Kang) arriving on a deer-drawn cart with attendants carrying his qin zither sites.asiasociety.org.

- One or two sages in animated conversation or “pure conversation” pose, perhaps holding scholarly fans.
- One sage playing a flute or strumming the lute (Ruan Xian likely).
- Wine cups and flasks scattered about, and of course abundant bamboo framing the scene.

Such imagery conveyed an idyllic world of cultured men free from worldly care. It contrasted starkly with the reality many viewers lived in, making it either an escapist fantasy or a pointed critique. In times when open criticism was dangerous, hanging a painting of the Seven Sages in your study could itself be a subtle statement of dissent – a coded way to say you prefer the grove to the palace.

Philosophical Legacy: Philosophically, the Seven Sages contributed to the evolution of **Neo-Daoism (Xuánxué)** – an intellectual trend that dominated third to fifth-century China. They helped shape discussions on the nature of the Dao, the value of emotion vs. detachment, and the ideal of the “true person” unfettered by convention. Ji Kang’s emphasis on *ziran* (naturalness) and critique of slavish ritual fed into later Taoist and even Zen Buddhist thinking about authenticity. Guo Xiang (the commentator who worked with Xiang Xiu) built on their ideas to argue that everything in the universe has its own nature and one shouldn’t force unnatural behavior – a view that echoes through Eastern thought.

Role Models for Personal Integrity: Each sage provided a different angle on integrity:

- **Ji Kang** became the model of the martyr-scholar – later figures like the Southern Song patriot **Wen Tianxiang** or various executed ministers have been likened to him, praised for standing by principle unto death.
- **Ruan Ji** became a cultural archetype of the “drunken genius poet” – many Chinese poets who enjoyed liquor and lament (from Li Bai to the eccentric late Ming playwright **Li Yu**) saw him as a patron spirit. His notion of veiling political criticism in art became a common practice in literati culture (e.g., writing about falling flowers to lament a fallen kingdom).

- **Liu Ling** gave inspiration to those who champion a **carefree, bohemian lifestyle**. In later centuries, Chinese literature often fondly portrays characters who echo Liu Ling’s ethos – the happy drunk who is wiser than he appears. Even in contemporary times, one might see references in novels or pop culture to “drinking like Liu Ling” as shorthand for a devil-may-care attitude.
- **Xiang Xiu and others** who did scholarly work remind future scholars that even if the world doesn’t appreciate you now, your commentaries and writings might be vindicated in posterity, as theirs were.

Influence beyond China: The fame of the Seven Sages also spread to East Asia broadly. In **Japan**, as early as the 9th century they were known, and by the 16th–17th centuries, Japanese artists frequently depicted them on screens and scrolls sites.asiasociety.org. The Japanese found their tale resonant during their own civil wars and times when samurai faced the choice of loyalty to warring lords or internal exile. In a way, the Seven Sages became part of the transnational lore of wise men who value **art over power**.

In **Korea**, interestingly, while the exact Seven Sages weren’t as popularly referenced, the underlying idea of a “bamboo grove” as a safe space, drawn from that folktale of the king’s ears, permeated culture. One could say that whenever people needed to articulate the conflict between **truth and authority**, the image of the bamboo grove – whether via the folktale or the sages – was at hand.

We should note, however, that real history is always more nuanced than legends. Critics might point out that the Seven Sages didn’t set out to be heroes; they were likely just trying to survive and stay true to themselves. It was later generations that lionized them, sometimes glossing over unflattering details (like perhaps the fact that not all sages were as pure – e.g., Wang Rong’s comfortable official life could be seen as compromise, yet the legend conveniently downplays that). This phenomenon is common: posterity often simplifies and idealizes predecessors to serve its own narratives.

The enduring appeal of the Seven Sages lies in their **humanity** combined with principle. They were flawed – they drank, they squabbled (recall Ji

Kang and Shan Tao's fallout), they ran away from problems rather than solve them, one could argue. But it is precisely those human choices that make them relatable. They chose friendship, art, and authenticity, with all the messy consequences, over playing a part in a system they couldn't stomach. That trade-off – sacrificing potential worldly achievements for peace of mind and soul – is one that has timeless fascination.

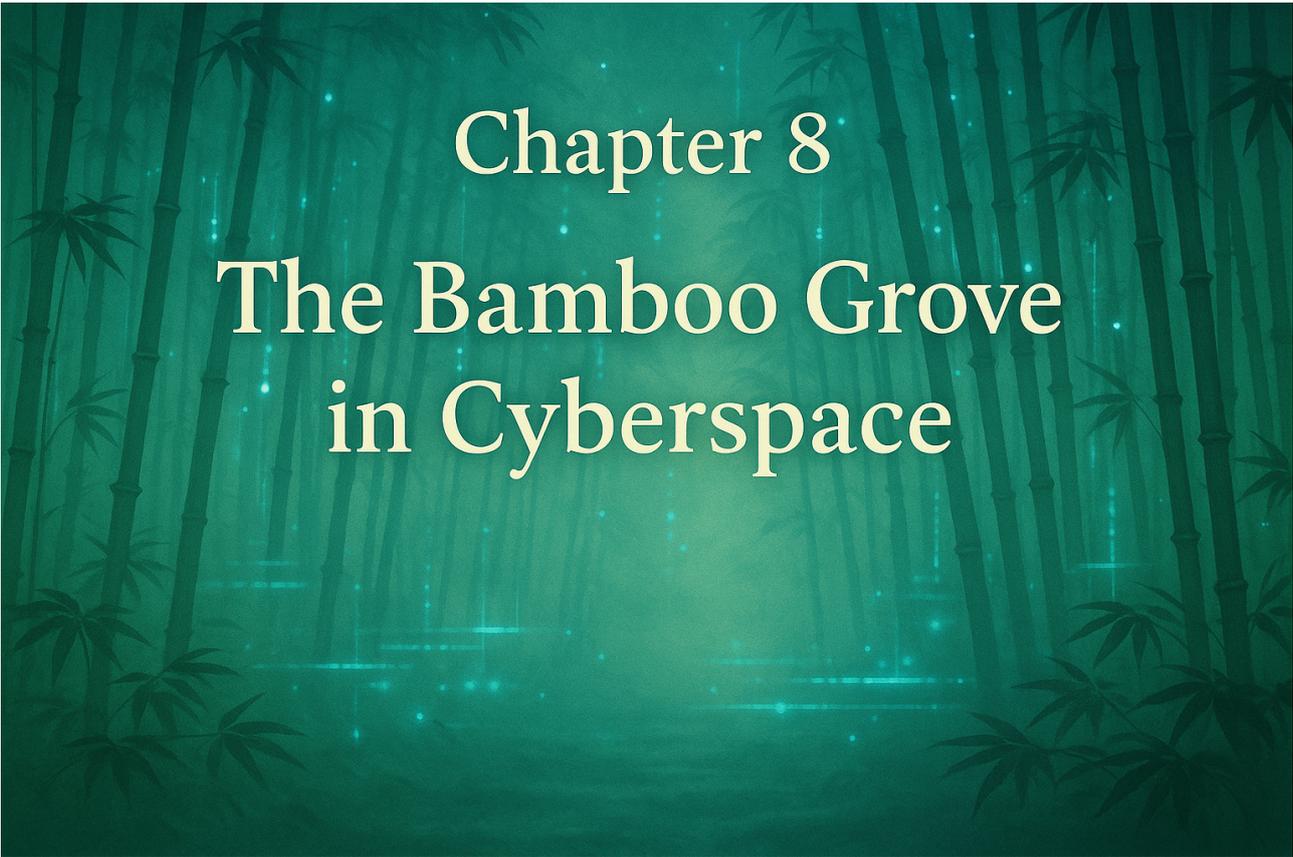
In modern times, we see similar reverence for those who drop out of a corrupt “rat race” to live simply. For example, the 1960s counterculture in the West mythologized poets and musicians who withdrew from mainstream society. In some ways, the Seven Sages were **ancient counterculture icons**. And just as posters of 60s rock stars adorn college dorms, images of the Seven Sages adorned the studies of idealistic scholars through the ages.

Finally, their legacy in the digital age is perhaps something they could never have imagined, yet it follows logically: the term “bamboo grove” (or forest) has been revitalized to mean **anonymous online forums** where one can speak freely. This might be their most surprising legacy – linguistic rather than direct. When Korean college students create a “Bamboo Forest” Facebook page to air complaints, they are unknowingly echoing the spirit of Ji Kang and his friends gathering to critique palace life away from prying eyes charactermedia.com. When an office worker uses an anonymous social media account (a modern *shout into the bamboo grove*) to expose corporate wrongdoing or simply to share frustrations, they are part of a lineage of whistleblowers dating back to that legendary hatter of King Kyungmun or, metaphorically, to the Seven Sages sending coded messages in their poetry.

The Seven Sages have thus transcended their era to become **symbols** – of intellectual freedom, loyal camaraderie, and the artist's refusal to be co-opted. Their lives were short (most died in their 40s or 50s), but their influence is long. It's worth pondering: would they have been surprised that people still talk about them 1,700 years later? Likely, yes. They might have laughed at the idea of becoming icons; they were, after all, somewhat anti-iconic in their rejection of fame. But perhaps in their quiet moments, they did hope that their words and actions would not be in vain. And indeed, they were not. The bamboo grove they planted – as a metaphor –

kept growing through history, providing shade and solace to all who identified with its message.

As we prepare to conclude, it's fitting to consider how that metaphor has taken root in today's digital communications and social networks – our final link between past and present.



Chapter 8

The Bamboo Grove in Cyberspace

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On a modern online forum, an anonymous user types out a confession or complaint that they wouldn't dare voice under their real name. They hit "Post," and their words appear for thousands to see, yet no one knows the identity behind the account. This scenario is commonplace today, from Reddit threads to university Facebook confession pages. In South Korea, such anonymous social media channels are literally called "**Bamboo Forests**" (대나무숲) charactermedia.com, directly invoking the ancient tale of the secret told to bamboo. It's a striking example of how a cultural metaphor can evolve and find new life.

The **online Bamboo Forest phenomenon** began around 2012 in Korea, when a disgruntled employee created a Twitter account to anonymously criticize their company's misdeed [scharactermedia.com](http://charactermedia.com). The account gained attention and inspired others. By 2014, many Korean universities had set up "Bamboo Forest" Facebook pages where students could submit posts anonymously (via admins) about anything on their mind [scharactermedia.com](http://charactermedia.com). These posts range from serious discussions of social and political issues to everyday college gripes and personal secrets

charactermedia.comcharactermedia.com. The anonymity allows a freedom of speech that is often hard to exercise in a culture emphasizing harmony and hierarchy.

This modern practice is explicitly linked to the **old Silla kingdom fable of King Kyungmun's ears and the hatter** charactermedia.com, which we recounted in the prologue. The moral is clear: some truths cannot be contained – if people can't voice them openly, they will find a hollow or a grove (or an internet forum) to release them.

What's fascinating is how the internet, in many ways, functions like a vast bamboo grove. It is a space where:

- Identities can be masked (much like how the grove conceals the speaker).
- Communities form around shared interests or grievances, echoing the camaraderie of the Seven Sages banding together.
- Allegory and inside references are commonplace to avoid direct confrontation or censorship (just as the sages used allegory in their writings to criticize authority britannica.com).
- There is a mix of frivolity and profundity – humorous memes exist alongside heartfelt anonymous testimonials, just as Liu Ling's antics coexisted with Ruan Ji's lamentations.

Consider an example: A student at Seoul National University writes a post titled "10 People You Meet at SNU" on the SNU Bamboo Grove page, humorously critiquing campus stereotypes en.snu.ac.kr. It's lighthearted but also implicitly commentary on the social environment at the elite university – something that might be awkward to say out loud in person. This post sparks discussion and laughter. In another case, during a national debate on a controversial topic (say, LGBTQ rights or tuition fees), students flood the bamboo forest page with their candid opinions charactermedia.com, both pro and con, creating a genuine dialogue that might not happen in classroom or family settings due to social pressures charactermedia.com. The anonymity "liberates" them to speak without fear of ostracism.

There's also a darker side: like real bamboo groves that can carry whispers far and wide, internet anonymity can spread rumors or hateful words that have real impact. King Kyungmun in the legend tried to silence the bamboo by cutting it down when it spread his secret returntobusan.com; similarly, authorities today sometimes shut down forums or enforce real-name policies when anonymous criticism gets too potent. The first company bamboo Twitter was deleted once the company discovered itcharactermedia.com, but by then the idea had taken root and many more sprang up hydra-like. This cat-and-mouse dynamic is exactly what one imagines between creative dissenters like the Seven Sages and the powers of their time – e.g., Ji Kang writing an oblique essay to critique something, the authorities banning it, others writing new pieces in turn.

One could ask: *Are online anonymous forums the new hermitages?* In a sense, yes. People retreat to them for refuge from the constraints of official or societal identity. Just as the sages left the court's surveillance to speak freely in nature, modern netizens leave the surveillance of social expectation and perhaps government monitoring by adopting pseudonyms in online "safe spaces." A witty comment on this parallel: whereas the seven friends had to physically gather in a remote grove, today one can join a "bamboo grove" from one's bedroom, connecting with like-minded souls across distances.

The nature of discourse also has similarities. The sages engaged in what they called "**pure conversation**" (**qingtan**), a sort of free-form intellectual discussion unbound by rigid propriety britannica.com. If you scroll through threads on an anonymous forum, you'll see freewheeling conversations that jump from topic to topic, users riffing off each other's ideas, often unfiltered by politeness since they aren't face-to-face. This can lead to crassness at times (not unlike perhaps some drunken banter the sages might've had), but it can also produce remarkably sincere and deep exchanges. People often share vulnerable feelings or unconventional opinions under the cloak of anonymity – an echo of those "**pleasures and hardships of country life**" that the sages wrote about honestly, as opposed to the forced smiles of court life britannica.com.

A concrete outcome of the Korean bamboo forests: they've given youth a voice in debates traditionally dominated by elders. For example, during political protests or campus issues, posts from these forums have been

quoted in mainstream media as reflecting the true sentiments of young people. It's reminiscent of how the ideas incubated in the Bamboo Grove (like critiques of ritualism or advocacy of naturalness) later influenced mainstream Chinese thought. The grove is a crucible for what might later become publicly acceptable or at least acknowledged sentiments.

However, anonymity isn't a panacea. Modern bamboo groves face challenges like **moderation** (someone has to ensure things don't go off the rails) and the risk of false information or trolling. Likewise, the sages' grove wasn't perfect – they might have been tone-deaf to the plight of common folks while enjoying their wine, one could critique. But in both cases, these forums – whether physical or digital – **fill a void**. They offer what the primary channels of communication lack: authenticity, horizontal peer-to-peer dialogue, and a measure of safety for vulnerable truths.

We can also draw parallels in the **psychological function**. The Korean blog excerpt from “*Where is your bamboo grove?*” suggests that everyone needs a bamboo grove (metaphorically, a confidant or outlet) to avoid mental distress brunch.co.kr. In modern urban life, anonymity on the internet can act as that confidant when a real one isn't available. People confess depression, seek advice for personal issues, or blow off steam to strangers who nonetheless understand. It's akin to Liu Ling using wine and his tolerant friends as therapy, or Ruan Ji confiding his sorrows to his verses and by extension to sympathetic readers. The tools differ, but the human need is the same.

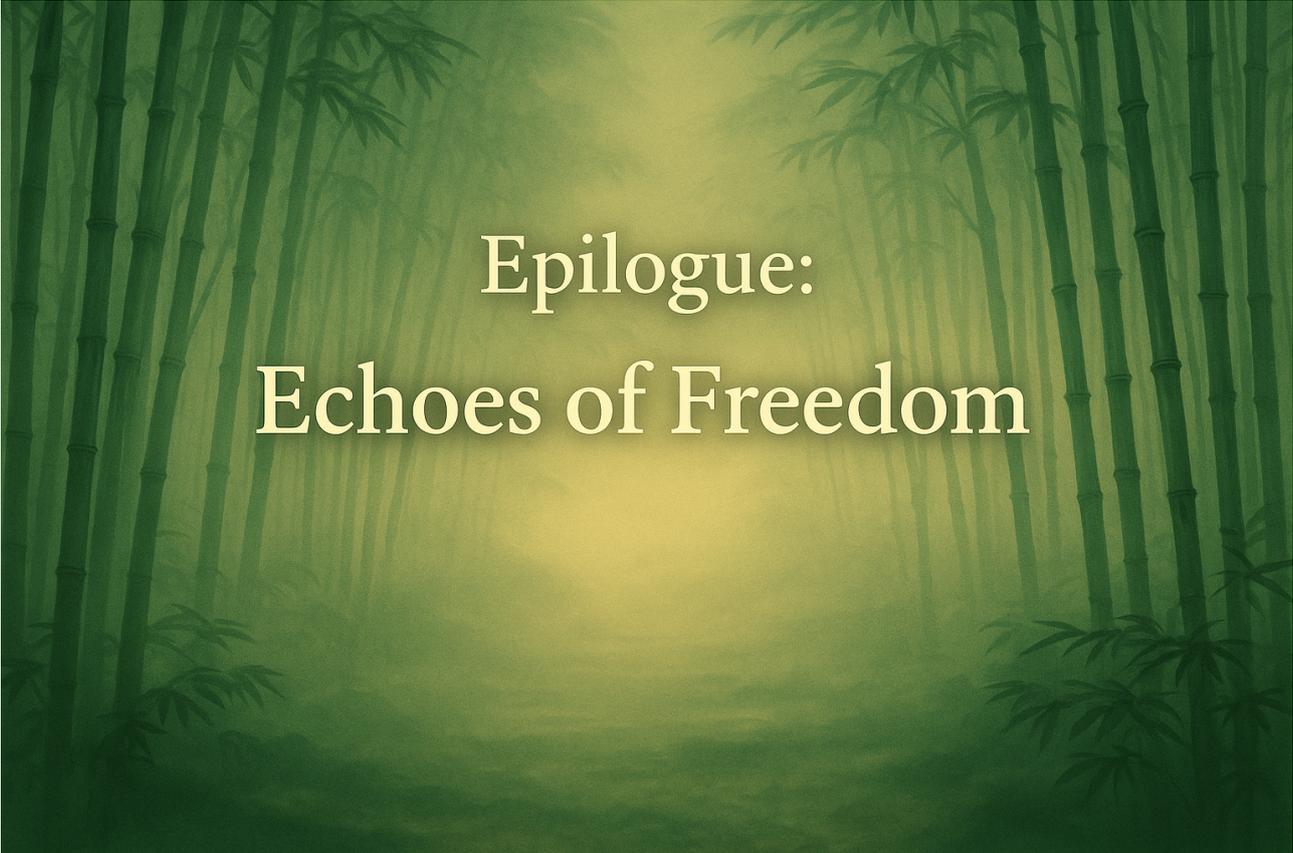
One might wonder: what would the Seven Sages do if they had access to the internet? Perhaps they'd maintain a witty group blog – Ji Kang posting provocative think-pieces, Ruan Ji uploading poetry at midnight, Liu Ling sharing pub reviews and philosophical musings after his third bottle, Xiang Xiu running a Zhuangzi quote-of-the-day account, Shan Tao with a LinkedIn profile trying to connect idealists with government reforms, Ruan Xian dropping music tracks, and Wang Rong curating memes while occasionally bragging about his investments. It's a humorous thought, but not entirely far-fetched – they likely would have embraced any medium that allowed them to connect and express with less filter.

On a more serious note, the fact that we still use the term “**bamboo grove**” for certain digital spaces is a testament to the continuity of cultural

memory. It bridges the ancient and the hyper-modern. When someone posts anonymously on Bamboo Grove about a problem and another replies empathetically “나에게 털어놔도 돼” (“you can confide in me”), they are unknowingly echoing a dynamic that might have existed when Xiang Xiu listened to Ruan Ji’s troubles. The underlying structure: a safe environment + empathy + lack of judgment = a haven for the soul.

In conclusion, the Bamboo Grove in cyberspace demonstrates that while technology changes, the fundamental patterns of how humans seek freedom and fellowship remain. We create new groves whenever needed: be it a retreat in the woods or a subreddit. The Seven Sages would find the medium unfamiliar, but the spirit – of candid conversation among equals, shielded from oppressive scrutiny – very much recognizable.

As we move to the epilogue, it’s clear that the Bamboo Grove is not merely a historical footnote or a legend. It’s a living metaphor that continues to adapt, symbolizing the **unquenchable thirst for an honest life** in community with others. The sages of old and the netizens of today, across oceans of time, would nod in understanding at one another, perhaps raising a cup (or clicking an upvote) in mutual respect for speaking one’s mind.



Epilogue: Echoes of Freedom

Epilogue: Echoes of Freedom

A rustle of leaves. A cursor blinking on a screen. A gentle note plucked on a lute. A burst of laughter among friends unseen by authority. These are the **echoes of the Bamboo Grove**, reverberating from ancient China to our present world.

In this journey, we ventured into the quiet clearing where seven men dared to live truthfully amid lies. We felt their fears and joys – Ji Kang’s stoic final song on the zither, Ruan Ji’s midnight grief and drunken shouts, Liu Ling’s roaring laugh in the nude, Xiang Xiu’s pensive remembrance, Shan Tao’s cautious tightrope-walking, Ruan Xian’s serene chords, Wang Rong’s youthful wonder. We saw how their camaraderie created an oasis of sincerity in a desert of deceit. We also saw how the world remembered them: in poems, in paintings, in porcelain, in ideals whispered and shouted across centuries.

Their story reminds us that **every generation must find its bamboo grove**. The forms differ. For some it’s a literal retreat to nature – a cabin in the woods to decompress from city life. For others, it’s an intellectual salon, a book club or café gathering where ideas flow without fear. And for

millions today, it's the digital communities where one can drop the mask of the social self and speak as a true self. The common thread: humans yearn for authenticity and will carve out spaces to pursue it, even under threat.

There is also a lesson about **balance**. The Seven Sages sought to escape worldly corruption, but they could not entirely escape the world's consequences. Similarly, online anonymity grants freedom but not without new challenges. The bamboo grove is a symbol of refuge, not utopia. Real bamboos can be cut down; online forums can be shut down or misused. Thus, the goal is not escapism for its own sake – it's to nurture something precious (integrity, creativity, mental peace) so that it isn't extinguished by conformist pressures. The sages' retreat was a way to keep the flame of **individual thought and friendship** alive during dark times, so that when the times improved, that flame could light the way forward.

In our era, the pace of change is dizzying, and yet the reflections of Ji Kang and his friends still hold a mirror to the core of our experiences. We grapple with “the impossibility of palace (corporate/political) life” for honest individuals britannica.com – how to maintain ethics in cutthroat environments. We celebrate “the pleasures and hardships of country life” – or more broadly, the pros and cons of opting out of the rat race for a simpler existence britannica.com. We use **allegory to criticize** when direct words would bring backlash – be it in a satirical tweet or a coded protest song. We relish the support of “several thousand followers” petitioning for justice in an online campaign, reminiscent of those who petitioned for Ji Kang's life plato.stanford.edu. We find solace in **music and art** during crises, just as the sages did in their arts. In short, we continue to live variations of their narrative.

Perhaps the enduring charm of the Seven Sages is that they show both **rebellion and camaraderie**. They didn't go alone into hermitage – they went as a band. Their solution to a hostile world was not only a middle finger to authority; it was an arm around each other's shoulders. In an age where many feel lonely despite hyper-connectivity, this aspect speaks volumes. True connection, where you can let down your guard, is precious. As the Korean writer mused, “*everyone needs a bamboo grove... someone who will be your bamboo grove*” – a confidant who listens without judgment brunch.co.kr. The Seven Sages were that for each other. Their

grove was not just physical bamboo; it was the **trust and understanding** among them. That is something we can all aspire to build in our own circles, both offline and online.

Let us imagine a final scene: a bamboo grove at twilight, empty of people now, just the quiet clacking of stalks in the breeze. In that golden half-light, perhaps the ghosts of seven friends gather once more. One pours wine into ceramic cups for the others. Another tunes a lute. They talk in low tones – about what, we cannot fully discern, but there’s the cadence of both laughter and sighs. One recites a couplet that makes the others nod knowingly. As night falls, they light a small lantern, its glow akin to the fire of fellowship they kindled long ago. The world beyond can’t touch them here. In this gentle company, their spirits are free.

That grove lives on not only in memory but in every act of courage to speak freely and every gesture of friendship that guards that freedom. As long as there are those who seek truth and those who listen, the **bamboo grove will never truly be silent.**



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