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*Jason A. Carbine*

# SONS OF THE BUDDHA

CONTINUITIES AND RUPTURES  
IN A BURMESE MONASTIC TRADITION

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Jason A. Carbine  
Sons of the Buddha

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Jason A. Carbine

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## Abbreviations

As	<i>Atthasālinī</i>
D	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
Mil	<i>Milindapañha</i>
Moh	<i>Mohavicchedanī</i>
Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇī</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
Sv	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī</i>
Vibh-a	<i>Sammohavinodanī</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya-piṭaka</i>

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## A Note on the Name Myanmar


Since 1989, the Burmese military has used the name Myanmar (B. *Mranmā*, မြန်မာ) instead of Burma for the country, and it has insisted that anyone referring to the country in English do the same. It is claimed that Burma is a foreign name and must be abolished; that “Bama” (on which “Burma” is actually based) refers properly to the Burman majority; and that Myanmar refers to the whole country and all its ethnic groups. The name is gaining more widespread use, though many, especially supporters of the pro-democracy movement in the country, do not accept the designation “Myanmar.”<sup>1</sup> I recognize the controversy over the name, but I have opted to use Myanmar instead of the using the more cumbersome Burma/Myanmar or alternating between Burma and Myanmar.

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1 For further information on the names Burma and Myanmar, see, for example, Lintner 2003 p. 174, Steinberg 2001 pp. xi–xii, Houtman 1999 pp. 43–48, Myanmar’s Embassy in Washington ([http://www.mewashingtondc.com/Myanmar\\_Burma.htm](http://www.mewashingtondc.com/Myanmar_Burma.htm)).

## Conventions for Transliterations, etc.

Most of the monks addressed in this study speak with and write about one another in Burmese, their vernacular. They also use Pali, the canonical language of their monastic tradition, especially in rituals and commentaries. In terms of my use of these two languages in this study, as well as Sanskrit, which is also important for understanding the Shwegyin and Burmese cultural world, readers should note the following.

1. In most cases, Sanskrit words are indicated with an “S,” Pali words with a “P,” and Burmese words with a “B.” Transliterations for Sanskrit, Pali, and Burmese follow the conventions approved by the Library of Congress and American Library Association.<sup>1</sup> For Burmese transliterations in particular, this means a sacrifice of pronunciation for consistent accuracy in spelling. However, I make exceptions for Burmese proper names, which are spelled approximately the way they sound. For example, the Burmese name  is not transliterated as “Phui” Kyā” but rather as Pho Kyā. Moreover, for a few select Burmese words and phrases, I dispense with the conventions and offer a transliteration based on sound.

2. Names of organizations (such as “Shwegyin Nikāya” and “Ministry of Sāsana Affairs”) are capitalized but not italicized. Certain titles of monastic administrative positions (such as “Head of the *Sāsana*,” “Associate Head of the *Sāsana*,” and “Presiding Authority”) are capitalized but may have italicized, transliterated Pali or Burmese words in them.

3. Some Pali and Burmese words, when transliterated, are also capitalized for the sake of reader clarity, even though neither Pali nor Burmese use capital letters. For example, I use both *Dhamma* (for teachings of the Buddha) and *dhammas* (for the constituent components of mind and body), depending on context.

4. In terms of passages quoted from other works, I have not, for the most part, in those passages attempted to standardize spellings, transliterations, and italics of Pali and Burmese words. In many cases, there are no set conventions that various authors follow. For example, where I use *nibbāna* another author may use Nibbana. On occasion in the body of this study, I alert the reader to such variations.

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1 See Barry 1997.



5. Finally, in addition to being intended for an English-speaking/reading audience, it is my hope that Burmese, whether academics or not, find this study or parts of it worthy of debate and discussion. To that end, when I translate passages from Burmese and Pali I provide the original passages as well.

## Map of Myanmar

With administrative borders as well as some places of significance for the Shwegyin.





# Introduction: From the Śākyamuni Buddha to the Shwegyin Tradition

## The Setting of the Study

By any standards, the Buddhist religious culture of Myanmar is deep and vast. Touring the country, one can find thriving traditions of lay and monastic meditation, expanding male and female monastic traditions, copious Buddhist publications, numerous temple renovations, and large-scale, military-backed Buddhist ceremonies. Traveling to various pagodas, one can have gold leaf pasted to them by ringing a bell and sending the gold along a small cable car to the shrine. At the mighty Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon, believed to house the relics of the present and three past Buddhas, one can witness teams of women compete in yearly robes-weaving contests. At the impressive Great Cave, also in Yangon, one can sit in an assembly hall meant to recall the cave in India where the First Buddhist Council is said to have taken place after death of the Buddha. One can travel to the hills of Sagaing and hear recitations of sacred texts resounding from the walls of nunneries, or visit the famous kingdom of Pagan and its immense temple-dotted “plain of merit.”

In the environs of Mandalay, one can meditate in caves in front of skeletons said to have been donated to the monastic community in the times of kings, and then venture forth to the pilgrimage site of the Mahamuni image, also claimed to have been made during the lifetime of the Buddha himself. In Pegu, the humble but sacred precincts of the Kalyāṇī Sīmā (“Auspicious Ordination Hall”) await, the seat of one of the most famous “overhauls” of the monastic community in Southeast Asia. When making the very long and arduous bus trip from Yangon to Mandalay, or to and from other areas requiring a long bus trek, one can hear tape recordings of protective chants, some from the metaphysical *Abhidhamma* (The Doctrine Pure and Simple) itself.

If Buddhist doctrine and metaphysics are indeed one’s thing, the many traditional and more modern centers of Buddhist learning are populated by knowledgeable people who can help one on the way. If monastic rituals and liturgies inspire one, one is welcome to ordain as a

temporary or life-long monk or nun and seek the nature of things. If the lightness and frivolity of festival times attract one, the festival of lights marks the descent of the Buddha from the Tāvātimsa heaven after preaching the *Abhidhamma* to the *nats* (gods). Such is Myanmar, home to wizards, hair-relic worship, the Golden Rock, a Buddhist monastic community that is the largest semi-autonomous institution outside military control, and two modern Theravāda Buddhist Councils (one was held in 1871 and the other was held from 1954 to 1956).

As Gustaaf Houtman points out, within this Burmese Buddhist religious culture, one can be identified as a “Buddhist” in a variety of ways, frequently associated with the term *Sāsana*.<sup>1</sup> A *Sāsana* consists of the teachings and practices established by a Buddha or “enlightened one” and illuminates the path of thought and practice that helps beings achieve liberation from suffering; the current *Sāsana* is considered to be that of the Śākyamuni Buddha who lived some 2500 years ago in north-eastern India. In contemporary Burmese religious culture, a Buddhist is not simply a Buddhist, end of story. Rather, there are many shades of Burmese Buddhist identity, often related in some way to the *Sāsana*.<sup>2</sup> For example, one can be “inside the *Sāsana*,”<sup>3</sup> a term often reserved “for those Buddhists with a heightened and special involvement with the” *Sāsana* through ordination, the following of moral precepts, and meditation.<sup>4</sup> This kind of identity applies especially to monks, though lay practitioners of meditation and nuns have sometimes described themselves in this way. As a monk, novice, or nun, a person may also be identified as one “carrying out duties for the *Sāsana*,”<sup>5</sup> and at the pinnacle of such carriers are figures known as “Head of the *Sāsana*.”<sup>6</sup> These monks have played roles much like that of a *San̄gha-rāja* (“king of the monastic community”) in other contexts in South and Southeast Asia; sometimes they have been powerful leaders and other times decidedly less so, sometimes subverted by real kings and sometimes not.

In contrast to supporting the *Sāsana* “from being at the inside of it,”<sup>7</sup> one may support the *Sāsana* “from being at the outside of it,”<sup>8</sup> as one

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1 Houtman 1990a.

2 The reader can be alerted to the fact that Śākyamuni is not the first Buddha believed to have dispensed his teachings, nor is he believed to be the last who will.

3 “Inside the *Sāsana*” = B. *Sāsanañ vañ*, သာသနာဝင် ; in these opening paragraphs the English transliterations and Burmese spellings will be in the footnotes.

4 Houtman 1990a p. 120.

5 B. *Sāsanañ wan’ tham*, သာသနာ့ဝန်ထမ်း။

6 B. *Sāsanañ puin*, သာသနာပိုင်။

7 B. *atvañ ka ne*, အတွင်းကနေ။

8 B. *aprañ bhak’ ka ne*, အပြင်ဘက်ကနေ။

who acquires the “heritage of the *Sāsana*.”<sup>9</sup> To acquire this “heritage,” one sponsors “the monastic ordination ceremony [and] provide[s] the eight monk requisites. [The phrase] implies that an individual is nearer to the [*Sāsana*] than ‘ordinary’ laymen who have never sponsored an ordination.”<sup>10</sup> On occasion, the phrase may even be used to refer to those who have sponsored the construction of a religious building, such as an ordination hall. The epithet is traced back to the time of the Indian monarch Aśoka (r. ca. 270–230 BCE), who claimed to be a Buddhist in this sense. Moggaliputtatissathera, a leading monk, set him straight: Aśoka, with all of his good works (e.g., the building of wells, reservoirs, pagodas, etc.), was only a “master of charity.”<sup>11</sup> To acquire the “heritage of the *Sāsana*,” he needed to sponsor an ordination.<sup>12</sup>

In supporting the *Sāsana* “from the outside of it,” that is, as a layperson, one can also be “a good person in a lineage of the *Sāsana*.”<sup>13</sup> This phrase, along with “patron of the *Sāsana*,”<sup>14</sup> “refer[s] to Buddhists who are not ‘inside [the *Sāsana*]’ but who are, or consider themselves to be[,] more than ordinary Buddhists.” These phrases may apply to “hermits, devotees, nuns, trustees, etc.,” who perform various deeds in support of the *Sāsana*.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as either monk or layperson, one can be actively engaged in “doing the work of the *Sāsana*,”<sup>16</sup> via implanting doctrines and practices in particular areas, near and distant. In all of these contexts, monks, nuns, and male and female devotees can all be referred to as “sons and daughters of the Buddha,” though more rules and regulations, specified in various *Sāsana* texts, apply for those “sons” and “daughters” of an ascetic bent.

Such phrases do not exhaust the ways in which Burmese may identify themselves as Buddhist,<sup>17</sup> but they are enough to suggest that Bur-

9 B. *Sāsana*’ *amwe*, သာသနာ့အမွေ။

10 Houtman 1990a p. 121, brackets mine. The eight monastic requisites (P. *aṭṭhaparikkhārā*) are the three robes, an alms bowl, a razor, a needle with thread, a girdle, and a water strainer.

11 B. *dāna rhañ*’, ဒါနရှင်။

12 Houtman 1990a p. 121 and Ashin Silacara, private communication.

13 B. *Sāsana*’ *nway*’ *van*’ *sū* *to*’ *cañ*’, သာသနာ့ နှစ်ဝင်သူတော်စင်။

14 B. *Sāsana*’ *dāyaka*, သာသနာဒါယကာ, *Sāsana*’ *dāyikāma*, သာသနာဒါယိကာမ။

15 Houtman 1990a p. 121, brackets mine.

16 B. *Sāsana*’ *pru*, သာသနာပြု။

17 See Houtman 1990a. Also, on pp. 121–122 he argues that the “widest and least specific” category consists of those “inside Buddhendom” (B. *buddha bhāsa van*’, ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာဝင်), a phrase that connotes a general belief in the Buddha, his teachings, and the monastic community. Moreover, as Houtman notes, there are Burmese phrases for people who follow the Buddhist customs of their parents and grandparents but

mese religious culture in general has a very compelling and high level of engagement with the texts, doctrines, and practices of the *Sāsana*. Indeed, when surveying such phrases, one gets the impression that the texts, doctrines, and practices of the *Sāsana* have in their own distinctive ways become the crucibles for dominant expressions of Burmese Buddhist religious culture. For these reasons, the *Sāsana* and categories related to it (such as “lineage,” “sons of the Buddha,” and “the *Sāsana*’s front-line fortress”) function as the major Buddhist categories coursing through this analysis. They constitute the heart of the emic conceptual threads upon which this book is based.

With regard to this deep and vast Burmese Buddhist religious culture, with its various degrees of emphasis on *Sāsana*, I have in this book decided to focus on one of the most important monastic traditions in Myanmar, the Shwegyin, widely considered to express an intense form of being “inside the *Sāsana*.” The Shwegyin were initially founded in Upper Myanmar in around 1860 by Ashin Jāgara (1822–1894), who became known as the First Shwegyin Sayadaw. Shwegyin is the name of Jāgara’s natal village and Sayadaw is a term of respect for a revered monk.<sup>18</sup> The Shwegyin are one of the “Mindon sects”<sup>19</sup> and are known among Shwegyin themselves and also among others within Myanmar as *in-gyin khet-kyain Shwegyin Gaing*.<sup>20</sup> This is a mnemonic phrase for the Burmese-era year 1222 (i.e., 1860) in which the group was founded and it is a sound bite for the identity of the group, “the Shwegyin group—strong like a sal tree.”<sup>21</sup> (The sal tree is the type of tree under which the Śākyamuni Buddha is believed to have been born.) The Shwegyin have become the second largest monastic group in Myanmar (close to 40,000 as of 1999, with some present day figures offering around 80,000). Though significantly less numerous than the Thudhammā (Myanmar’s largest monastic entity), the Shwegyin have played a crucial role in the production and reproduction of Buddhist values, orientations, and practices in the country. As a monastic institution, they are “sons of the

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without going beyond superficial rhetoric and practice: *mi yo pha la boddha bhatha* (B. မိယောဖာလာဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာ).

18 The term “Sayadaw” is ambiguous since it can mean that a monk is a royal preceptor or is a simply a presiding monk of a monastery.

19 The Shwegyin are among several monastic groups that trace their origins to monks of Mindon’s time. Mendelson 1975 pp. 84–114 calls these the “Mindon sects.”

20 B. အင်ဂြိမ်ကုန်းကျိပ်စွယ်စုံ. I discuss the Burmese term *gaing* (*guin*”, ဂိုင်”, derived from Pali *gaṇa*, meaning “meeting,” “chapter,” “collection,” or “multitude”) later in this study.

21 Ashin Silacara, private communication. For a Shwegyin discussion of the date, see *Articles on the Shwegyin Sayadaw and Gaing* 1995 pp. 26–27.

Buddha" par excellence, and they remain known for a disciplinary strictness also associated with the much better known Thai Tham-mayuttika order established by King Mongkut during his time as a monk (1824–1851).

This book is not only meant for readers interested in the Buddhist worlds of South and Southeast Asia. Intended as a theoretical and methodological contribution to the study of religion, the book examines Shwegyin religious culture, with its focus on the *Sāsana*, especially through the analytical categories of tradition and traditionalism. These categories are discussed at length in chapter one, but for now emphasis can be given to the fact that in general I treat tradition as a social institution constructed around ideas of continuity and disruption/rupture. In doing that, and in bringing the emic viewpoints of the Shwegyin into conversation with the etic enterprise of interpreting the Shwegyin as a tradition with a particular type of traditionalism, the book is meant for anyone interested in questions pertaining to religion and society.

There are two main arguments that emerge from this study, one about Shwegyin religious culture and one about Burmese religious culture. The argument about Shwegyin religious culture is this: the concepts and practices of the Shwegyin tend to focus on the dual ruptures of *nibbāna* (*nirvāṇa* or liberation) and *Sāsana* (as a collection of texts and an embodied community) as well as on corresponding and dual notions of continuity, namely those of *saṃsāra* (cycle of rebirth) and *Sāsana*. I suggest that Shwegyin monks, as a tradition, are based on a collective effort to foster appropriate kinds of human thought and action related to the dual forms of rupture and dual forms of continuity.

The second line of argumentation concerns Burmese religious culture more generally. If the Shwegyin evidence is exemplary, both Shwegyin and wider Burmese religious culture have been and are undergoing a process of *Sāsana*-ization, by which I mean a focusing and expansion of Buddhist religious thought and practice in light of the concept of the *Sāsana*, as well as of components of thought and practice associated with that concept, ranging from the *Vinaya* (Discipline) to the *Abhidhamma*, from texts to bodies, and from various continuities to various ruptures. Simply put, for Shwegyin and wider Burmese religious culture, the *Sāsana* has become an end in and of itself, and around that "end" all sorts of extremely important developments are taking place. Unpacking what these two lines of argumentation mean for our understanding of Buddhist cultures in and beyond Myanmar is the ultimate task of this book.

With respect to the Shwegyin evidence, the substantive chapters of this book explore the time period from around 1860 (the founding of



the Shwegyin) to 2003 (when the third of my three research stints in Myanmar came to a close). The chapters address historical and biographical texts, administrative practices and records, ritual patterns, and down-to-earth sermons on the highest reaches of Buddhist philosophy. By doing that, the book discusses relations between the Shwegyin tradition and the larger sociocultural world that has been part and parcel of its history and development.

To clear the way for the substantive chapters, this introduction offers a descriptive sketch of cultural patterns within the history of Buddhist monasticism in Asia, leading up to developments in Myanmar and other Asian lands. I provide this sketch in part because the Shwegyin believe that their history begins with the Śākyamuni Buddha and with particular efforts that he made to help people break free of suffering. I also provide this sketch to help highlight the fact that the Shwegyin transmission of the *Sāsana* cannot be reduced to the forces of modernity, even if the Shwegyin are a “modern” monastic organization formed in the crucible of British colonial expansion into Myanmar. And I provide the sketch to help readers see where the Shwegyin fall in terms of the history of Buddhist monasticism in general. With this sketch in place, the introductory narrative narrows somewhat and addresses the early development of the Shwegyin, and it then alerts the reader to certain vicissitudes of more recent Burmese political history. The introduction closes by distilling the scholarly context in which this study participates and by outlining in more detail the trajectory of the subsequent substantive chapters.

## From Śākyamuni . . .

The story told in this book actually begins in northeastern India sometime during the sixth to fourth centuries BCE.<sup>22</sup> At that time, India wit-

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22 This section, i.e., “From Śākyamuni . . .,” and the next, i.e., “. . . To Monastic Organization and Practices . . .,” are adapted and revised from Carbine 2000 pp. 1117–1120 (permission via Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.; see page vi for full info.) and Reynolds and Carbine 2000 pp. 11–14. Readers interested in historical, social, political, and cultural dimensions of Buddhism in and beyond Myanmar, in addition to what is presented in the following overview, may find some of the following representative works useful: Aung-Thwin 1985, 1998, and 2005, Bartholomeusz 1994, Bizot 1988, Blackburn 2001 and 2010, Buswell 1992, Collcutt 1981, Collins 1982 and 1998, Faure 1996, Frasca 1996, Gethin 1998, Gunawardana 1979, Havnevik 1989, Henry and Swearer 1989, Holt 1991 and 2009, Kieschnick 1997, Kitagawa and Cummings, eds., 1989, Malandra 1993, Mendelson 1975, Mus 1998, Numrich 1996, Orzech 1998, Prebish 1975, Ray 1994, Rozenberg 2005 and 2010, Sarkisyanz 1965, Schober

nessed a great deal of social change, as well as intellectual and religious fervor. Among the religious thinkers who emerged during this period of challenge and efflorescence was a young man who came to be called the Gotama Buddha, the person credited by the Buddhist tradition with establishing the basic patterns of thought and practice intrinsic to the *saṅgha* or monastic community. He also came to be called Śākyamuni, because he was a sage (*muni*) of the Śākya people.

Overcome by visions of suffering, the still young Gotama renounced his princely life to become a wandering mendicant. He became frustrated in his attempts to learn from other mendicants and embarked on a solitary meditative quest in search of understanding into the true nature of life and the suffering inherent in it. Later Buddhists believed that Gotama's meditative quest culminated in a tremendous amount of insight: he became a Buddha by making the radical rupture out of the cycle of rebirth (S. *saṃsāra*).

According to various sources, Śākyamuni understood that all existence, including all sentient life, was constituted by composite mental and physical entities that are subject to a virtually endless cycle of dissolution and reconstitution, of death and rebirth. He realized that desire—especially the desire for self-preservation—was the primary force that drives this cycle. He knew that one's entrapment in this cycle could be overcome by the mindful practice of a "middle path" that avoided the two extremes of self-indulgence on the one hand and an overly austere lifestyle on the other. Śākyamuni preached this basic message in a multitude of forms over the fifty or so years that followed his enlightenment until his death. Normatively speaking, this basic message underpinned the earliest ethos of the *saṅgha*.

The ethos of the early monastic community was preserved, at first orally and later in written form, in a collection known as the *Vinaya-piṭaka* or "Basket of Discipline." This basket contained the various regulations for the monastic community, including the *prātimokṣa*, a list of codes of conduct (see below). The *Vinaya* and subsequent *Vinaya* literature (commentaries, handbooks, and the like) have remained essential to the communal and liturgical constitution of the *saṅgha* and its self-identification with the life and teachings of the Buddha.

Since its beginnings under the guidance of the Buddha, the *saṅgha* has greatly facilitated the historical development of Buddhism. Though modest in its beginnings, the *saṅgha* eventually grew in size to consist of major institutional bodies responsible for the preservation of the

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2005 and 2010, Schopen 1997, Silber 1995, Strong 1992, Swearer 2004 and 2005, Tambiah 1984, Teiser 1988, Veidlinger 2006, Wijayaratna 1990, Wilson 1996.

purported teachings and practices of the Buddha, the ordination of novices and monks, and the performance of various kinds of protective rituals intended to safeguard the lay members of the community.

A significant contribution of the *saṅgha* was its role in the transmission of Buddhism to lands beyond the Indian context. This transmission began in a serious way with the reign of the Indian monarch Aśoka (r. ca. 270–230 BCE), remembered by later Buddhists to be a *Dharmarāja* or righteous king. While it is not absolutely clear from the historical evidence that Aśoka was personally a Buddhist, he nonetheless provided major support for the Buddhist cause. Among other actions, he sent Buddhist monastic emissaries to areas beyond his realm. From his reign forward, such travelling monks occupied an essential position in the flowering of Buddhism as a pan-Asian religious tradition, as well as in the rise of distinctive cultural forms of the tradition.

The high water mark of Buddhism as a pan-Asian religious tradition (fourth to sixth centuries CE) witnessed the transregional passage of monks along both land and sea trade routes. This character of the Buddhist tradition eventually broke down, but acculturation to local customs in each of the areas to which Buddhism spread led to major innovations in monastic life and practice. In many areas—including China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos—Buddhist monastic traditions developed their own distinctive character.<sup>23</sup>

Two developments were central to the long-term success that the Buddhist *saṅgha* achieved in both its pan-Asian and culturally specific expressions. First, while the tradition of wandering monks remained a vital component of monastic practice, many monks decided to forgo it in favor of living in permanent residences. This development, which probably began during the lifetime of the Buddha, was facilitated by gift giving from lay patrons such as kings and wealthy merchants and families. Such gifts contributed to the growth of monasteries and temples as centers of missionary work, scriptural study, philosophical speculation, artistic innovation, and retreat. By about the fifth century CE, large-scale monastic centers appeared on the scene, and in many cases they served as major sites of learning, attracting scholars from various regions across the Buddhist world.

A second development important for the *saṅgha*'s long-term success was a broad but still significant distinction between monastic and lay life. Ideally, the *saṅgha* was the communal body that focused on the interpretation and exemplification of the Buddha's message. This kind

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23 A case in point is the growth of Buddhist masses for the dead in medieval China.