Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is a supplemental episode.

In this episode, we're doing a deep dive into the Buddhist monastery life during the Northern Song dynasty. We've gotten a nice taste of that life so far in the novel as we followed Lu Zhishen's hilarious failed attempt to fit in as a monk. How much of what's depicted in the novel is accurate? Let's find out.

I'm going to split our look at Buddhism in the Northern Song into two supplemental episodes. In this episode, I'm going to take a big-picture look at growth of Buddhism during this time and its relationship with the Song government. Then, in the second supplemental episode, which does not currently exist yet and will come out at an unspecified later date, I'm going to paint a picture of what daily life was like for a Buddhist monk at this time.

Now, a quick caveat before we go on. I am not an expert in history or religion, and I'm not a Buddhist, so I apologize in advance for any mistakes I might make in this episode. And please do let me know if I make a mistake. What's important is that we get this stuff right. Also, there are times when I might make a joke or two. It's not intended as disrespect toward any religion; I'm just trying to keep things light here.

Oh, if you're interested, much of the information in this episode came from the book "How Zen Became Zen" by Morten Schlütter, a scholar in Chinese religion at the University of Iowa. A PDF of the book is available online and I have included a link to it with the script for this episode on our website. So go find it at outlawsofthemarsh.com.

Buddhism originated in India around the 6th century BC, and Buddhist missionaries first brought the religion to China along the Silk Road around the first century AD. So by the time of the Northern Song, Buddhism had existed in China for more than 800 years. Over that time, it had developed into one of the major religions in China, carving out a spot alongside native-born systems of belief like Daoism and Confucianism. Buddhism also absorbed influences from those other two systems of belief, and each of

those two, in turn, saw something in Buddhism that appealed to its own precepts. For instance, Daoists were actually among the first Buddhist recruits in China, and they liked the Buddhist meditational techniques, so they merged them with Daoist meditation. Furthermore, Daoist terminology was mapped to some Buddhist concepts in the first translations of Buddhist texts into Chinese. Confucianists, meanwhile, liked Buddhism's emphasis on morality. But that didn't mean that Daoists and Confucianists just welcomed Buddhism with open arms. Buddhism was always seen as a foreign religion, a barbarian influence, and over the course of its history in China, Buddhism would have to compete with Daoism and Confucianism and endure periods of state persecution.

Now, there are two major branches of Buddhism. One is Theravada Buddhism, and the other is Mahayana Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is widely practiced in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, while Mahayana Buddhism is commonly found in East Asia, including China, Korea, and Japan. Each of these two branches points to a different source of Buddhist text as the official word of the Buddha. Theravada Buddhism is the more orthodox branch, while Mahayana is more big-tent in its approach, adapting more rituals, mysticism, and worldly flexibility. Theravada Buddhism believes the Buddha to be unique, while Mahayana Buddhism sees him as one of many Buddhas. Theravada Buddhism believes only monks can achieve Nirvana, while Mahayana believes it's attainable for anyone.

The branch that spread into China was Mahayana Buddhism, and once in China, it of course further splintered into multiple schools. The one that we are going to focus on is Chan (2) Buddhism, which is what came to be known as Zen Buddhism. This is the school that became the dominant school of Buddhism practiced in China. Chan Buddhism's telling of its history traces its origins to the late fifth century, when a monk named Bodhidharma was said to have brought this branch of Buddhism into China. He apparently is also credited by Chinese legends as the guy who started the physical training of the monks at the Shaolin Monastery, which then grew into the famous Shaolin kungfu.

There’s little written record of Chan Buddhism’s first 300 or so years in China. Its own legends tell of Six Patriarchs, including Bodhidharma, who were the first teachers of Chan. We also know that Chan split into a Northern school and a Southern school during this period.

The next two centuries, running from 765 to 950, are considered the Classical period of Chan Buddhism. Politically, this was a chaotic time in China as the once-mighty Tang Dynasty began its death spiral after being shaken to the core by a huge rebellion. Eventually the Tang collapsed in 907, and China endured five decades of division and warfare that was known as the Era of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms before the Song Dynasty was established in 960 and reunited China. But amid this chaos, Chan Buddhism saw some of its most famous masters, whose sayings and teachings were recorded.

The next three centuries, from 950 to 1250, are considered the Literary period. This period spans the life of the Song Dynasty, and during this time, Chan Buddhism soaked up influence from the literati. They idealized the picture of the Chan from the preceding Tang Dynasty, painting it as a golden age. Also during this time, Chan Buddhism became the largest sect of Buddhism in China, thanks to the government’s use of its practice to increase state control of the country.

Now, let’s zoom in on Buddhism during the Northern Song dynasty. Even though the Song Dynasty was on the whole a pretty good time for Buddhism, it got off to a rocky start. In the year 955, the emperor of the Later Zhou, the last of the five dynasties in the Era of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, started a huge persecution of Buddhism. At this time, the government could bestow a name plaque to a monastery that was deemed illustrious. Well, this emperor decreed that any Buddhist monastery that did not have an imperial name plaque was to be torn down. Records show that more than 3,300 monasteries suffered this fate, and about 2,700 were spared. And the reason he did this? Well, he needed copper to mint coins, so he was going to melt down the Buddha statues.

A couple years later, the Buddha got his payback with some cosmic karma. The Later Zhou was overthrown by the Song Dynasty, and the founder of the Song stopped the destruction of the monasteries, but he also forbid the rebuilding of any monastery that had been torn down. Now, no one ever bothered to repeal this order, even as Buddhism grew later on in the Song Dynasty, so this decree stayed on the books but was in practice rarely enforced.

In their view, the rulers of the Song Dynasty saw Buddhism as both a potential benefit and a potential threat. It was a threat because, well, it was an organized religion and this is China. Enough said. But on the benefit side, the Song rulers believed that Buddhism had access to powerful supernatural forces -- you know, the kind of forces that can bestow favor on the ruling house and strengthen its power if properly placated. Beyond that, there were social benefits in having great monasteries around. Buddhist teachings about morality and the idea that there's hope for a better lot in your next life seemed like good instruments for reducing social tensions and keeping the populace in their place. And for their part, the Buddhist monasteries knew how to suck up to the emperors. They commemorated the birth and death days of emperors, and when the emperor was sick or when the empire was stricken by calamities like droughts, the monks would perform rituals and pray for the situation to improve.

So the Song rulers decided that they wanted to benefit from Buddhism but also strictly control it. To do this, they patronized Buddhist monasteries while imposing a bunch of regulations on them. Famous monasteries received money or grants of land and other valuables. Famous monks were invited to appear in the imperial court and given purple robes and honorific names as indicators of their exalted status. The government also got very involved in translating, compiling, and printing Buddhist texts. Buddhist monasteries were specially constructed and given the charge of taking care of imperial tombs and the birthplaces of emperors. And in return, the monasteries wisely played their part in glorifying their imperial patrons. They displayed portraits and statues of emperors and empresses for worship, and

inscriptions at Buddhist sites often compared emperors to famous monks or bodhisattvas. So it was a "You scratch my back, I scratch yours" relationship, except where one party has the power to break the other's back if the scratching was not sufficient. But in any case, the government support allowed Buddhist monasteries to flourish. In the year 1009, records indicated there were about 25,000 Buddhist monasteries. By the year 1059, that number had grown to about 39,000.

So that was the patronage side. Let's look at the control side, and boy there were lots of controls. In fact, the Song government's regulation of Buddhism surpassed any before it. The state tried to insert itself into every aspect of Buddhism: the teachings, the rituals, the texts, the ordination of monks and nuns, the building expansion of monasteries, the selection of monastic leaders.

One mechanism of control was something we've already discussed -- the granting of imperial name plaques to important monasteries. This practice dated back centuries, and it was believed that the government could soak up the magical juju that accumulated in whichever monasteries it gave a name plaque to. On the other side of the equation, monasteries with imperial name plaques enjoyed an added degree of protection from, well, the same government that bestowed the plaques. The destruction of the plaque-less monasteries during the Later Zhou, which we mentioned earlier, is a good example of this.

The Song took this plaque-granting practice and made it a centerpiece of its dealings with monasteries. The second Song emperor handed out a bunch of plaques, and they continued to be granted pretty regularly throughout the Northern Song. But this practice really ratcheted up a notch during the reigns of the Zhenzong (1,1) and Yingzong (1,1) emperors, which spanned the years 997 to 1067. During this time, they were basically handing out plaques like candy. Monasteries only had to meet rather modest size requirements to be eligible for a plaque, and the local officials were responsible for determining which monasteries should get plaques, so a lot of smaller monasteries that may not be

on the emperors' radar but were of local importance got a plaque. The monasteries got prestige, while the government got control over the monasteries.

The granting of plaques slowed down a lot after 1067, beginning with the reign of the Shenzong (2,1) emperor. And from there on, the issuance of new plaques slowed to a trickle. In fact, the government started preferring the transfer of plaques from defunct monasteries instead of granting new ones. Also, the building of large new monasteries slowed down.

During this time, the government also began implementing another means of control over Buddhism -- the selling of ordination certificates. So, if you wanted to become a Buddhist monk or nun, you needed to have one of these certificates. There were two types of certificates. The first type came with your name written on it, and these were usually given out by the emperor or other VIP types. The second type was blank, and they were designed to be sold, and then whoever buys it and uses it can fill in the name they want. So in the novel, remember how when the squire suggested to Lu Zhishen that he become a monk, the squire mentioned he had already purchased a certificate? Well, this is what he was talking about.

Now, with 30-some thousand monasteries around, it doesn't take a genius to realize that selling ordination certificates was a pretty nice revenue stream for the government. And it was no small thing to buy a certificate. The price of certificates generally rose with inflation, and at some point it got so high that it was not uncommon for the certificates to be beyond the means of postulants at monasteries who wanted to become monks.

Next, I want to talk a little bit about two different types of Buddhist monasteries during this time. One was known as hereditary monasteries, and the other was called public monasteries. A hereditary monastery was a private monastery. It was the de facto property of the monks or nuns living there, and they essentially constituted a "tonsure family." When a novice monk joined the order, he joined that

family, and he received a set of rights and obligations that stayed with him for his entire life. He could, for instance, live in that monastery his whole life, which monks from outside the family could not.

Public monasteries, on the other hand, had no such familial underpinnings. Public monasteries also tended to be larger, and they were much more accessible to outsiders. Any monk in good standing could live and take office at any public monastery. And monks weren't the only ones who could stay at a public monastery. Some lay people could also stay there. In fact, some members of the literati would rent living quarters at public monasteries for themselves and their families while they crammed for the civil service exam. The public monasteries were also a place of public life, serving as tourist attractions for commoners and often central marketplaces. For instance, the Great Xiangguo Monastery in the capital Kaifeng that Lu Zhishen went to in the novel was a well-known marketplace for all sorts of merchants and traders.

One significant difference between hereditary monasteries and public monasteries is the way the abbot, aka the leader of a monastery, is chosen. The leadership of a hereditary monastery was passed down through members of the tonsure family, usually from the most senior member to the next, as long as that next person in line has actually been staying at the monastery and fulfilling his duties.

Things worked quite differently at public monasteries. The abbots of public monasteries were chosen from the best candidates available, and they usually came from outside the monastery. In fact, at a public monastery, an abbot's own disciples were not allowed to succeed him in the position, and that rule essentially prevented a public monastery from ever becoming a hereditary one. What's more, whereas an abbott at a hereditary monastery would presumably remain in the post until his death or retirement, abbots at public monasteries usually only stayed at one monastery for a few years before moving on to the next post, in essence climbing a career ladder.

When it was time to select an abbot for a public monastery, the authorities of the prefecture in which the monastery was located would tell the local Buddhist registry to call a meeting of all the abbots

of public monasteries in the prefecture, and these guys would select a suitably qualified candidate. So it was kind of like picking a pope. Except in this case, the candidate had to be confirmed by the prefectural authorities. And this provided the state with an important mechanism of control over the public monasteries. In cases where the assembly of abbots could not produce a suitable candidate, the authorities would select a monk from another region.

So officially, a public monastery's abbot was chosen by other abbotts and confirmed by the state. But in practice, it seemed that the state often played a much more direct role in the appointment of a new abbott. In many cases, secular authorities would just appoint a new abbott without the clergy playing any role. This happened with some of the most famous public monasteries, and in those cases, the appointment often came directly from the emperor or his court, and who was going to quote procedures and formalities to them? Similar things also happened at the provincial level, with powerful officials or influential members of the elite steering the appointment to their preferences.

Now, in case it's not clear to you, this system of appointing abbotts at public monasteries was ripe for abuse and corruption. First, you have secular authorities holding significant power over who got the appointment, so naturally bribery became a thing. In fact, sometimes they would just straight-up sell the position. And this was a coveted position. Public monasteries, especially the really prestigious ones, accumulated large amounts of wealth and land, and abbotts could build up a pretty little personal fortune through their positions. And the fact that abbotts at public monasteries moved every few years meant that some of these abbotts did not have a particularly strong bond with the monasteries they were overseeing, and merely saw them as cash cows for personal enrichment, and that led to even greater temptation to resort to bribery to get an appointment at public monastery. In many ways, public monastery abbotts resembled public officials, trying to move up steadily through the ranks by job-hopping every few years and doing some grifting at each stop along the way.

In case you are wondering, for most of the Northern Song, public monasteries seldom converted to hereditary monasteries, due in no small part to the fact that the government laid down severe punishments if anyone should attempt such a thing.

On the other hand, many hereditary monasteries converted to public monasteries. Why would they do that? Well, there's the fact that public monasteries were more prestigious and received greater government backing, which could be a nice perk. But another major factor could have been that the monks at the hereditary monasteries didn't really have a choice. Even though technically the tonsure family, aka the community of monks living at a monastery, had to give their consent before a hereditary monastery could be turned into a public one, there is consent, and then there's "consent," if you know what I mean. In some cases, the conversion happened when there were no qualified internal candidates for the abbott-ship, so an outsider was chosen and the monastery converted to public in the process. In many cases, though, authorities simply said, "Ok, you're a public monastery now, and what are you gonna do about it?" And the answer was usually, "Nothing," given that the government really, really wanted monasteries to public and under the state's oversight.

In addition to converting many hereditary monasteries to public ones, the Northern Song also built a large number of new public monasteries. Now, each public monastery was associated with a particular school of Buddhism. So there were public monasteries specifically associated with Chan Buddhism, public monasteries associated with teaching, and public monasteries associated with Vinaya Buddhism, which was another branch of the faith. Of these, Chan Buddhism had a particularly strong connection with the public monastery system. Therefore, as a result of the Song government's promotion of public monasteries, Chan Buddhism took off and became the dominant branch of Buddhism in China.

So far, everything we have covered makes it sound like the Song was really good for Buddhism, and for the most part, that was true. But then, when we got to the reign of Huizong emperor, things took a

U-turn. While he opened his reign with a fairly supportive stance toward Buddhism, the Huizong emperor was also very taken with Daoism, and a few years into his reign, in 1107, he actually began a persecution of Buddhism and tried to eliminate it as a standalone religion separate from Daoism. The Daoist clergy was given preference at court, and Huizong declared that Buddhist temples could no longer display the images of Lao Zi, the founder of Daoism, and Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, alongside the image of the Buddha, since that implied the Buddha was at the same level as those other two. Three years later, in 1110, Huizong went even further, implementing a three-year ban on issuing Buddhist ordination certificates.

He followed that up by building a special network of Daoist temples, in some cases converting Buddhist temples to Daoist establishments. Once those temples were built, he just straight up declared that Buddhist monks had to give up Buddhism and become Daoists. They were ordered to adopt Daoist-style clothing and hair and give up their dharma names. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas were given Daoist sounding names, and their statues were dressed up like Daoist deities. Even the word for temples was changed to convey that they were now Daoist.

Alas, this persecution was relatively short-lived, by which I mean it lasted 13 years. In 1120, a year after the last of these persecution measures had been laid down, Huizong withdrew all the measures, but he kept in place the ban on issuing ordination certificates, which lasted another eight years. Well, just like the last time an imperial government tried to persecute Buddhism, the Buddha got his revenge on Huizong. In 1127, armies from the Jin kingdom to the north sacked the Song capital, captured Huizong and his son, and put an end to the Northern Song Dynasty. The Buddha is indeed a vengeful god.

So overall, the Northern Song was a good time for Buddhism's growth, even if it came with the condition of heavy government regulation. Records showed that in 1021, there were more than

397,000 monks and more than 61,000 nuns living in Buddhist monasteries. Buddhism was strong enough to withstand the persecution under the reign of the Huizong emperor, even though that persecution did slow down the religion's growth, and that slowdown continued in the succeeding Southern Song Dynasty. Still, there was no denying that Buddhism grew substantially over the whole of the Song Dynasty.

Alright, that does it for this supplemental episode. In the next supplemental episode, we'll take a look at what it was like to be a Buddhist monk at this time. I'll see you next time on the Water Margin Podcast. Thanks for listening!