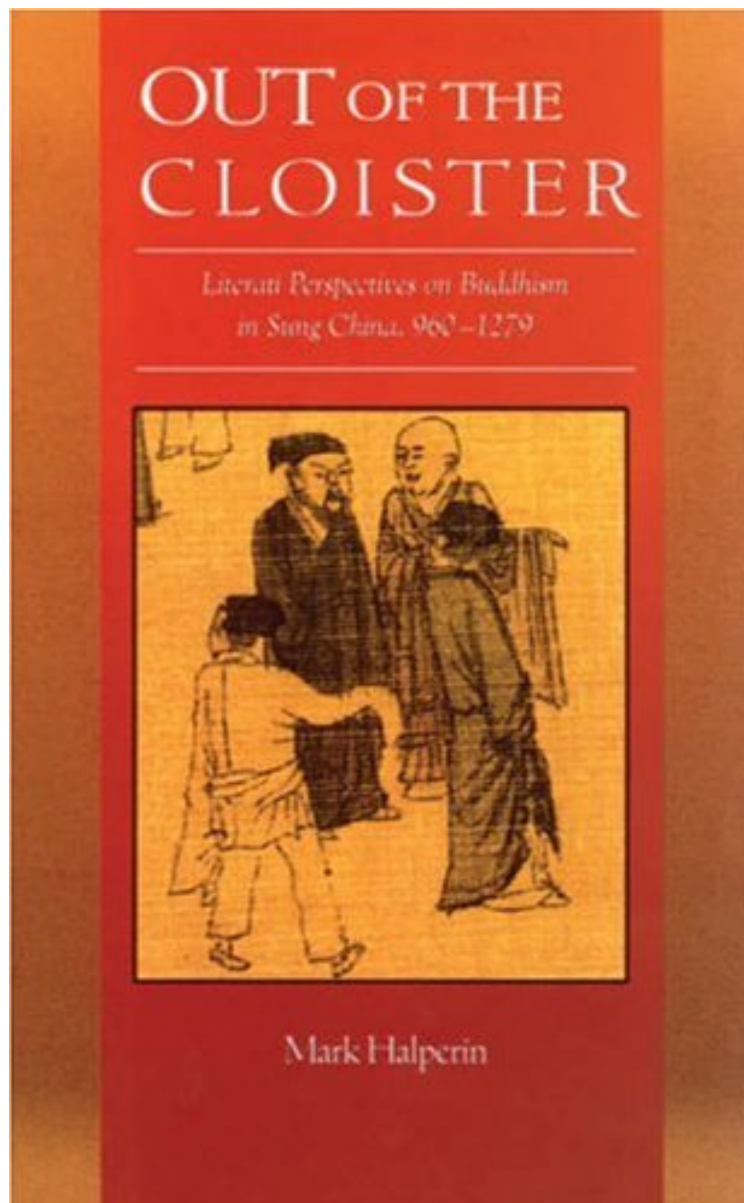


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## Out of the Cloister: Literati Perspectives on Buddhism in Sung China, 960-1279 (Harvard East Asian Monographs)

Mark Halperin

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Mark Halperin : Out of the Cloister: Literati Perspectives on Buddhism in Sung China, 960-1279 (Harvard East Asian Monographs) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Out of the Cloister: Literati Perspectives on Buddhism in Sung China, 960-1279 (Harvard East Asian

Monographs):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy S Greceive it in good condition.10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. A Memorable Look at a Love/Hate RelationshipBy Crazy FoxThis book is a model work of fine scholarship. Halperin has taken up some overlooked and understudied sources and explored them in depth and at length for what they tell us about the relationship between literati and Buddhist temples during the Sung dynasty, complicating previous assumptions about that relationship in the process. Instead of falling into the common pitfall of much academic writing today (grand sweeping theoretical generalizations and endless methodological mullings), he builds his case carefully and gradually from these primary sources, commemorations for temple renovation projects written by literati at the request of Buddhist monks. Confining his study to this one genre gives the book focus, but also proves intriguing in that by considering these scattered and various commemorations, a genre one might assume to be generic and dull with little to tell us, he uncovers patterns and paradoxes while unearthing large swaths of social history and significant shifts in religious attitudes and institutional development--and by the end of it, you'll never be able to blithely characterize the dynasty simplistically as one of Confucian rise and Buddhist fall ever again. There are a lot of little things about the book too that stand out. The one chapter on T'ang dynasty commemorations serves its purpose of contrasting with the Sung dynasty commemorations so as to highlight the latter's unusual characteristics, but it's also interesting in and of itself in showing the educated layman's grasp of Buddhist doctrine and devotion to Buddhist deities. The mutual interpenetration of Buddhism and the Imperial cult, the degree to which Sung Emperors were divinized, and the role of Buddhist temples throughout the empire in establishing commoner consciousness of the political/religious center were all new and fascinating topics (for me, at least). And it was nice to get a glimpse of the lives and ideas of literati not on the "top ten list"--educated and politically active men of some distinction other than Chu Hsi, Chou Tun-i, or the Ch'eng brothers--not that these latter guys aren't interesting or important, but with this book I got a more concrete sense of how their ideas were affecting their peers and society at large. Prospective readers of this fine book should keep in mind that it is a pretty specialized study in some ways. As someone with some familiarity with East Asian history and religion, I still found that Halperin was assuming knowledge on his reader's part that I didn't have (or did have but in a fuzzy, vague state). Most of this had to do with the ups and downs of Sung history, and if you're rusty on this you might want to give yourself a quick review. Also, he keeps referring to what I would identify as "Neo-Confucianism" with the term "Tao-hsueh"--I'm not sure what is at stake in not using the standard English term, but perhaps there are good reasons (why not then be consistent and render "Buddhism" in Chinese as well?)--if so, a quick explanation of the reasoning behind this terminological choice may have been in order, at least in a footnote, for the sake of those of us not "in the know". None of this detracts from the book, of course, and the author's overall argument is still quite clear if you have a reasonable level of background knowledge. In short, this is a valuable and well-written study grounded in extensive and careful work with primary texts all substantiating an important, overarching point. Anyone curious about how Buddhism actually functions in society should find it indispensable.

The intense piety of late T'ang essays on Buddhism by literati has helped earn the T'ang its title of the "golden age of Chinese Buddhism." In contrast, the Sung is often seen as an age in which the literati distanced themselves from Buddhism. This study of Sung devotional texts shows, however, that many literati participated in intra-Buddhist debates. Others were drawn to Buddhism because of its power, which found expression and reinforcement in its ties with the state. For some, monasteries were extravagant houses of worship that reflected the corruption of the age; for others, the sacrifice and industry demanded by such projects were exemplars worthy of emulation. Finally, Buddhist temples could evoke highly personal feelings of filial piety and nostalgia. This book demonstrates that representations of Buddhism by lay people underwent a major change during the T'ang-Sung transition. These changes built on basic transformations within the Buddhist and classicist traditions and sometimes resulted in the use of Buddhism and Buddhist temples as frames of reference to evaluate aspects of lay society. Buddhism, far from being pushed to the margins of Chinese culture, became even more a part of everyday elite Chinese life.

In this interesting and well-written study Mark Halperin paints a multi-faceted and complex picture of how members of the Song-dynasty educated elite viewed Buddhism and Buddhist institutions, and how in writing about them literati were able to express a range of opinions and critiques that went far beyond the Buddhist cloister. It is a welcome addition to a number of recent studies on the social history of the Song literati class and on elite Buddhism in the Song, but at the same time it offers an approach not attempted in any previous work. (Morten Schlutter Chinese Historical 2007-04-01)About the AuthorMark Halperin is Assistant Professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of California, Davis.