Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts: An Anthology. Edited by Georgios T. Halkias and Richard K. Payne. University of Hawaii Press, 2019. 808 pages. $85.00 (hardcover). ISBN 9780824873097.

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Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts may be one of the few edited collections offering heterogeneity as its organizing principle, doubtless due to the well founded presumption that the reader's brain will automatically translate, because of unconscious expectations, heterogeneity into homogeneity: "pure lands" into "Pure Land" and "Asian" into "Japanese," the latter all but redundant. It is these sorts of reflexive associations, or exclusions, this volume counters, particularly—though not quite explicitly—with its inclusion of selections drawn from traditions outside East Asia. This collection problematizes the essentialized character of "Pure Land" (upper case, singular) in ways that scholars have done with "Buddhism" in recent decades, with an attention to local forms and praxis. The volume's heterogeneity, of course, is not without limits: the editors determine its structure in thematic coherence as a means to display commonalities across Buddhist histories in which social forces and political pressures have been more important than any putative doctrinal orthodoxy. As a result, neither Sukhāvatī nor Amitābha/Amida is the inevitable focus, nor do we find only other pure lands and other buddhas represented. Rather, central are individual actors—some known, others unknown—and the historical contexts they represent, persons for whom and contexts in which such lands and buddhas were objects of contestation or veneration and ritual concern as well as, and perhaps most importantly, innovation within *claims* to authority.

Richard Payne and Georgios Halkias have assembled an anthology bearing witness to the diversity of what could be categorized as Pure Land Buddhism if we reconceive that as "pure land orientation." That

both editors are scholars of esoteric Buddhism should alert us to the close conceptual relationship between pure land and esoteric forms, a relationship deserving emphasis for those interested in Tibetan traditions, who otherwise might ignore such a collection due to habits of reflexive association. Below I pause over a few chapters to highlight the inclusion of material that should not escape those brave enough to take up this tome, for its commitment to recognize a pure land orientation in many forms throughout Asian Buddhist communities deserves careful attention.

With the six sections of the volume, Payne and Halkias displace the centrality that doctrine has had in the construction of Pure Land Buddhism as a singular phenomenon, focusing instead on how pure lands have functioned thematically for (Mahāyāna) Buddhists as but one element within their ritual or conceptual repertoire. The initial section, "Ritual Practices," features five chapters, of which only one takes Amitābha as its focus. The very first chapter could not be clearer as to the multiplicity of pure lands and the generality of intended devotion: "The Consecration Scripture Spoken by the Buddha on Being Reborn in Whichever of the Pure Lands of the Ten Directions You Wish." Section 2, "Contemplative Visions," includes two chapters deserving attention for their departure from "orthodox" Pure Land associations. "Liberating Desire: An Esoteric Pure Land Text by Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna" displays the extent to which pure land elements were but a slight part of the highly developed tantric culture of late Indian Buddhism. Here, Amitābha's presence has almost nothing to do with the goal of rebirth in a pure land, as he is in part serving in his role as Vajra Amitābha, one of five symbolic buddhas functioning within a tantric adept's transformation of body and mind in the ritual present, not a future rebirth. The following chapter, "Maitreya's Tuṣita Heaven as a Pure Land in Gelukpa Forms of Tibetan Buddhism," shows not only a different pure land than Sukhāvatī or even Abhirati, but, like the preceding chapter, the symbolic resonance between transcendence and immanence, between buddhas and enlightened teachers (gurus/lamas), in Buddhist tantra. Section 3, "Doctrinal Expositions," includes three interesting chapters portraying pure land orientation in differing places and times of contestation: Ming China (Charles B. Jones), nationalist Japan (Fabio Rambelli), and contemporary America (Michihiro Ama).

The next two sections focus on ways pure land devotion has oriented various types of experience and forms of communication for

Buddhists in different times and places. Section 4, "Life-Writing and Poetry," offers two chapters foregrounding biographical accounts testifying to the efficacy of pure land devotion and two chapters translating poetry, these latter two displaying again the continuity of pure land devotion with respect to other Buddhist forms of practice. Section 5, "Ethical and Aesthetic Explications," is a diverse collection whose thematic coherence involves explicit efforts to integrate pure land and other Buddhist concepts into different facets of mundane existence. The sixth section, "Worlds Beyond Sukhāvatī," leads readers not only away from this world again, but toward heavenly regions well outside typical Pure Land concern. The first two chapters come from China, Henrik Sørensen's reflecting the concern for post-mortem fates shared in Buddho-Daoist circles. Gábor Kośa's chapter displays the *upāya* of Manichaeans in China, perhaps following the lead of early Chinese Buddhists in adopting Daoist terminology to express and appropriate concepts; here, the Buddhist pure land becomes identified with the Manichaean Realm of Light. The final chapter is somewhat the inverse: Vesna Wallace has shown in prior work on the late Indian *Kālacakratantra* how it appropriates terminology from various Hindu traditions and translates it into Buddhist fare as a massive act of *upāya*. Wallace's chapter contains a twentieth-century Mongolian work that takes Śambhala as an earthly pure land comparable to Sukhāvatī. It is fitting for this heterogeneous volume to conclude here, at the furthest point in both time and place yet still within Asia, that a this-worldly pure land tradition traveled: nearly ten centuries, from India through Tibet to Mongolia.

Despite the editors' efforts to decouple pure land religiosity from Japanese Buddhist history ("the geopolitical dimensions of Pure Land worship"), the volume inevitably reflects the outsized role that Japanese Buddhists have had in creating the sense of an exclusive pure land orientation. The editors provide an introduction suggesting, though too briefly, how to reconceptualize the pure land orientation as (1) but one part of a larger Mahāyāna whole and, though not explicitly, (2) an important feature of, or complement to, esoteric forms of Buddhism. Several contributors cite Gregory Schopen's influential article that argues for understanding Sukhāvatī as a generalized goal not necessarily directly related to (or rather transcending in its

development) the more restricted Amitābha cult.[1] There is no particular reason, as Jonathan Silk notes in his chapter, to take Amitābha's later status in Japan as reflective of earlier Indian realities. Considering the subsumption of Amitābha within a fivefold buddha mandala in any number of Indian Buddhist tantras, as in Halkias's chapter cited above, that appears true. Given the overabundance of buddhas in late Indian Buddhism, Amitābha appears to be of minor significance indeed. Robert Sharf and Richard McBride have warned against taking "esoteric" or "tantric" as self-evident categories whose referents are practices related exclusively to distinct schools, a phenomenon of Chinese and Japanese Buddhist history.[2] Tibetans who claimed to derive their Buddhism largely, if not exclusively, from sources in India and Nepal did not understand the tantras to represent a distinct "school" but rather a genre of literature within the bodhisattva purview prescribing ritual practices binding the user to a particular enlightened being for specific ends. Surely from one perspective, these tantric systems (a term indicating here the grouping of related texts and the repertoire of practices they enjoin) are, as discussed below, cults: of Hevajra, Yamāntaka, etc. Without attempting to define "esoteric" or distinguish it from "tantric," I would like to suggest that the term indicates, if we oppose it softly to a pure land orientation, a binding relationship with an enlightened being/buddha whose locus, or focus, is this world and this lifetime, with goals related thereto. Devotion to the cult of one buddha need not conflict with another buddha's cult, both of which we could call esoteric, and it may be complementary to the cult of a buddha in whose pure land one hopes for rebirth, should buddhahood in the present lifetime not occur.

With respect to the first point, the editors argue for the use of cult in its classical sense as the proper "unit of study" in order to understand how pure lands operate within Buddhism. This classical sense is a "set of practices directed toward a particular figure," which could include the other-worldly locale and its enlightened being, such as

1. Gregory Schopen, "Sukhāvatī as a Generalized Religious Goal in Sanskrit Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 19, nos. 3–4 (1977): 177–210.
2. See Robert Sharf, appendix 1, "On Esoteric Buddhism in China," in *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), and Richard McBride II, "Is There Really 'Esoteric' Buddhism?," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 27, no. 2 (2004): 329–356.

Abhirati of Akṣobhya (a buddha), but also Potalaka of Avalokiteśvara. If we consider the Buddha himself to have been the object of such practices, then the cult of the Buddha's relics or the cult of the book appear to be of a kind. Payne and Halkias cite David Seyfort Ruegg in observing that the latter's post-mortem cult is directed toward the Buddha, whose presence is instantiated in relics.[3] Of course, the Buddha's relics remain an important object of veneration to the present, and contemporary masters within the Tibetan tradition, for instance, are expected to leave behind such remains. The cultural expectation is that the highly accomplished also will display a rainbow body to indicate their transcendence of birth and death via tantric practices. The *tulku* (Tib. *sprul sku*, Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*) typically remains, unless rising to the regional stature of the Dalai Lama or Karmapa, a local spiritual authority whose voluntary reincarnation represents the continuation of that transcendence. This "return" is predicated not merely on the compassion of the master but also on the prayers and petitions of the local religious community strengthening the karmic bonds for their ongoing teacher-student relationships. The physical landscape of such a community, then, becomes sanctified—becomes a pure land, as it were—by that local enlightened being's transcendence of death and, when occurring, their return.

With respect to the second point, the focus on this unity of study could entail conceiving of virtually the entire Tibetan tradition as "pure land" Buddhism, given its pejorative epithet, Lamaism. The Tibetan form of Buddhism is paradigmatically "pure land" in orientation from this cult-focused perspective. The Tibetan form centers around the lama, considered the fourth jewel, and across all sects its quintessential practice is guru yoga. James Apple's chapter, which considers the cult of Tsong Khapa that draws upon resonances of Maitreya and his Tuṣita pure land, makes an important first step in recognizing this orientation, one obscured by both the hegemony of Japanese sectarian categories and the excessive focus in the study of Tibetan Buddhism toward philosophy, at the expense of ritual practice. For many Tibetan Buddhist masters, philosophy and ritual practice mutually reinforce, each authenticating the other by means of scripture and experience.

3. David Seyfort Ruegg, "Aspects of the Study of the (Earlier) Indian Mahāyāna," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2004): 19.

Pure land orientations, in other words, are in most instances hardly distinct from esoteric forms of Buddhism.

Perhaps the reification of such distinctions is simply a failure of terminology presumed to express natural categories or of an appreciation of multiple possible goals that conflict only within particular iterations of Buddhism with exclusivist tendencies. In this way, attention to the local can obscure more than it illuminates. Considering the richness of this collection and its juxtaposing a range of Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) traditions, students of East Asian Buddhist traditions familiar with the exclusivist, school-based framework will find much to appreciate in this heretical heterogeneity. Further students of Indian and Tibetan traditions will gain not only a better understanding of the terms of contestation in East Asian circles but, more importantly, new ways to conceptualize and articulate features of their own traditions to facilitate communication and understanding across Buddhist landscapes. This would be just what the editors and contributors have instigated in a field that often privileges geographic regions and their modern sectarian realities as natural categories.