

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts: An Anthology.* Edited by Georgios T. Halkias and Richard K. Payne. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. x + 795 pages. Hardcover. ISBN-13: 978-0-8248-7309-7.

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This anthology presents a vast array of Asian Buddhist texts translated into English, each of which is preceded by a succinct introduction by its translator. As the title indicates, the common feature running through the selected sources is that all of them speak of a pure land, or pure lands, in their respective contexts. It must be emphasized that, throughout this volume, the worship of the Buddha Amitābha/Amitāyus and his Land of Bliss (Sukhāvatī) are treated as *one variation*, not as the standard, of what is called “Pure Land Buddhism.” The two editors, Georgios T. Halkias and Richard K. Payne, claim that the definitive qualification of Pure Land Buddhism is “the shared idea of a spatially located land, often identified as a postmortem goal of practice, and which is the special domain of a buddha or other similar figure” (p. 14). On this basis, this work is carefully designed to cover a rich variety of pure lands including, but importantly not limited to that of Amitābha. One of the primary objectives of this self-conscious effort is to demonstrate the diversity, ubiquity, and significance of Pure Land Buddhism which could otherwise be easily underestimated or even disregarded.

Accordingly, this huge anthology opens with a methodologically critical introduction by the editors, followed by the individual sources taken up in the subsequent twenty-six chapters. Another notable feature of the editorial strategies employed in this collection is that the sources are organized not on a geopolitical basis but instead under six thematic categories that form the six-fold structure of the book: I. “Ritual Practices,” II. “Contemplative Visualizations,” III. “Doctrinal Expositions,” IV. “Life-Writing and Poetry,” V. “Ethical and Aesthetic Explications,” and VI. “Worlds beyond Sukhāvatī.” By locating issues of doctrine on the same level as those of other kinds of categories such as practices and beliefs, this configuration by itself plays a vital role in challenging the assumed privileged position of the intellectual aspects of Buddhism in academia. The editors also attach an overview that encapsulates the theme and content of each of the six parts.

The first five chapters, which constitute part I, deal with ritual texts and contexts revolving around the idea of birth in a buddha field. Not only does this part reveal the multiplicity of the Pure Land beliefs extending beyond Amitābha and the Land of Bliss, but the sources translated here also attest to the historical significance of a range of practices to accomplish one's birth in a pure land: funerary rites in connection with buddha lands of the ten directions (ch. 1), visualization of Mahāvairocana's pure land (ch. 2), a tantric fire ritual centered on Akṣobhya (ch. 3), contemplation of Amitābha (ch. 4), and a series of tantric practices leading up to the empowerment of Amitābha (ch. 5). Chapters 2, 3, and 5, in particular, present central factors that make this anthology unique as they suggest a closer association between the Pure Land strands under discussion and esoteric Buddhist traditions than has previously been acknowledged.

Esoteric understandings of pure lands are further explored in the next four chapters contained in part II. It is not immediately clear how this second part is distinguished from the previous one since both largely pertain to ritual practices involving the element of visualization. Despite the title, "Contemplative Visualizations," the emphasis of the second part is not necessarily put on the distinctive implications of those specific types of practices vis-à-vis the ritualistic ones displayed in the first part of the book. Rather, the second part's collection of four texts effectively shows the existence of widespread discourse on buddha realms in so-called esoteric Buddhist lineages in India (ch. 1) and Tibet (chs. 1 and 2), as well as in East Asian countries including China (ch. 3) and Japan (ch. 4). From a paradigmatic perspective, Aaron P. Proffitt's statement in the fourth chapter is thought-provoking: "Esoteric Buddhism' and 'Pure Land Buddhism' functioned as overlapping and fluid areas of concern and specialization within a heterogeneous East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist environment" (p. 272). This does not simply shed light on dynamic linkages between the two types of Buddhism but problematizes the validity of the presumed distinction between the two in the first place.

Organized under the classical theme, "Doctrinal Expositions," part III consists of five chapters looking at relatively late interpretations of Pure Land doctrine with the exception of the final one: late Ming 明 China (ch. 1), modern Japan (chs. 2, 3, and 4), and seventh-century Korea (ch. 5). The general aim of part III, therefore, is not so much to trace the doctrinal development of Pure Land teachings as to draw our attention to creative expositions through which Asian Buddhist thinkers sought to situate Pure Land conceptions in specific social and intellectual circumstances. The most outstanding example in this regard is found in the third chapter, wherein Michihiro Ama introduces a Japanese minster's attempt to translate important Western events like Thanksgiving and Christmas into Buddhist cultural contexts.

As the title of part IV—"Life-Writing and Poetry"—indicates, these two different types of writings are taken up in this section. The first two chapters refer to hagiographical records from medieval Japan (ch. 1) and contemporary China (ch. 2), while

the other two chapters look at poems from Dunhuang, possibly during the Tibetan occupation (ch. 3), and Yuan 元 China (ch. 4). Taken as a whole, they aim to provide pragmatic, as opposed to philosophical, testimony to the soteriological power of what is generally classified as Pure Land praxis. Reciting the name of Amitābha, for instance, is recommended in the two poetic pieces presented in the third and fourth chapters. This could be read as examples of the syncretism of Pure Land and Tibetan esoteric Buddhism, as well as that of Pure Land and Chinese Chan 禪 Buddhism. Nevertheless, those texts can also serve as evidence *against* the independent entity of the retrospectively defined “Pure Land teachings,” instead illustrating universal interest in the Pure Land across conventional dogmatic boundaries.

From the standpoint of geographical and temporal diversity, the fifth part is atypical of this volume in that modern Japanese sources are dominant. Of the five chapters in part V, four introduce modern Japanese works: two discuss Shin 真 Buddhist ethics (chs. 1 and 2); one entails a Buddhist aesthetics inspired by Pure Land ideas (ch. 3); and one presents a this-worldly pure land based on the *Lotus Sutra* (ch. 5). The remaining one, chapter 4, deals with a late twelfth-century Chinese Buddhist treatise that tries to explain a harmonious relationship between Pure Land faith and Confucian values. A common concern shared among these texts is how to construe otherworldly Buddhist expressions in such a way that they impact the reality of this world not only on an individual level but, writ large, on a social scale as well. In this part, the reader will find valuable hermeneutical techniques and critical problems involved in an endeavor to apply figurative Buddhist teachings to actual, concrete situations.

The last part of this anthology extends the scope of the volume to include quasi-Pure Land discourses observed in Chinese Daoism (ch. 1), Chinese Manichaeism (ch. 2), and, lastly, Tibetan and Mongolian beliefs associated with the land of Śambhala (ch. 3). To be more specific, the three chapters in this part translate scriptural texts, including non-Buddhist texts, and examine the appropriation of Pure Land ideas where Buddhist pure lands are identified with Daoist heavens, such as the Heavens of the Highest Purity, the Manichaean Realm of Light, and Śambhala as a paradisiacal yet human realm. It should not be taken for granted that these matters appear in a book whose focus is on Pure Land Buddhism. They have become proper topics for consideration thanks to a broad definition of “a Pure Land idea,” as exemplified by Gábor Kósa’s depiction of it in chapter 2 as “any devotional aspiration to be reborn in a pure land” (p. 710). In this sense, part VI offers exemplary case studies and paves the way for further research on Pure Land issues of an interreligious nature.

Collectively, the six themes sketched above provide the reader with an abundance of new ways to investigate the traditional subject of “Pure Land Buddhism,” prompting us to look afresh at diversified phenomena that have been undervalued or overlooked in the conventional definitions of “Pure Land Buddhism.” Ironically, however, precisely

because of its intentional avoidance of the Japanese Buddhist sectarian perspectives underpinning a certain level of ideological unity of so-called Pure Land Buddhism, this anthology consequently questions the necessity of the very category under which the heterogeneous sources are gathered. The editors' introduction briefly addresses this dilemma, stating that the category is "heuristically" useful in facilitating "comparative study and critical dialogue" (p. 5). It is also true that the editors propose an expansive, alternative definition of "Pure Land Buddhism," which I cited in the first paragraph of this review. Nevertheless, a more concrete and detailed discussion based on the actual materials in this volume, such as what kind of unique conclusions can be drawn from a comparative examination of such a variety of texts, would more directly clarify the analytical effectiveness of "Pure Land Buddhism" as a notion constructed for academic purposes; the diversity and ubiquity of the Pure Land elements foregrounded throughout this collection are somewhat too general to fully understand the possibilities of the category.

Another problem in this regard is that the reasoning underlying this particular sixfold grouping of themes is not clearly given. There are other possible ways of arranging the materials even if we do not prioritize a geopolitical categorization. Further explanation of the logic behind the "positive" employment of the sixfold scheme would make this entire project more convincing. Indeed, on occasion, it is ambiguous as to why a given source has been placed in its particular thematic section. Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 in part III and chapters 1, 2, 3, and 5 in part V, for example, overlap with each other in the sense that they are relatively recent innovative exegeses aiming to remake a meaningful connection between seemingly otherworldly concepts and this world. Additionally, some of the section titles obscure the distinctive features of the corresponding themes. The titles of part I, "Ritual Practices," and part VI, "Worlds beyond Sukhāvātī," designate, as a matter of course, the common nature of the texts in each of these parts respectively. However, these topics are not limited to these parts of the volume alone. Ritual aspects and pure lands other than Sukhāvātī are widely addressed in the other parts as well, and in this sense, they seem to represent overarching foci of the entire project.

Despite these difficulties, the considerable value of *Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts: An Anthology* cannot be underestimated. This is a groundbreaking work both for its overall structure as well as for its carefully selected sources. Together these represent a refreshing approach to Pure Land Buddhism that is not founded upon such usual organizing principles as geopolitical, sectarian, or doctrinal boundaries. This genre-based anthology is recommended for a broader range of readers than those working on Chinese and/or Japanese Pure Land traditions. In addition to such "regular" readers, those interested in esoteric forms of Buddhism (notably those found in Tibet) will also greatly benefit both from the methodological reflections, as well as the so-called esoteric Buddhist texts, discussed in this volume.