Buddhist studies has long been organized around the concept of the nation-state, privileging regional expressions of Buddhism over transcultural connections. Moreover, the field has been informed by modernist and Protestant understandings of religion that highlight, in turn, the heroic quest of personal religious or mystical experience, doctrinal orthodoxy, and the perspectives and practices of elite religious and scholarly experts. The sum total of these preconceptions, as editors Georgios T. Halkias and Richard K. Payne note in their introduction, “presumes to have already answered the question: What is important about Buddhism?” And that answer leaves little room for a full appreciation of Pure Land Buddhism. With this volume, then, the editors hope to provide us with a heuristic that will allow for new studies of Buddhism, studies that can reveal connections, relationships, and influences heretofore obscured.

*Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts* is a collection of primary sources and commentaries from a wide range of languages, locations, and times across Buddhist Asia and North America, organized not by sect or geopolitical location but by genre. The editors’ heuristic also examines Pure Land Buddhism through the lens of cult, drawing on the classic definition of the term as a “set of practices directed toward a particular figure.” Understood in this way, Pure Land Buddhism becomes a more expansive term, referring to various collections of practices, texts, and doctrines focused on any particular buddha, bodhisattva, or other devotional figure. Such cults may foreground vows as well as a range of practices—from variations on the *buddhanusmṛti* theme (e.g., buddha-name recitation) and visualizations of buddhas and buddha realms to tantric empowerments. Pure Land cults, therefore, focus on specific
figures and their associated lands but need not be confined to a specific sect, community, lineage, monastery, temple, or institution. Cultic practices transcend such categories, allowing us to see otherwise obscured connections between lineages, times, and locations. Moreover, because these practices are as likely to be taken up by elite masters as by the laity, cult-as-frame breaks down the distinction that invariably privileges the elite perspective. This volume then is obviously concerned with a far more expansive view of Pure Land Buddhism and is not confined to one Buddha (Amitābha) and one Pure Land (Sukhāvatī). A scholarly focus on the Japanese Pure Land traditions of Jōdo-shū and Jōdo Shinshū, leaving aside their obvious import, has limited the study of Pure Land Buddhism to the concerns of these schools, their founders, their practices, and their constructed linages and thus obscures Pure Land cults embedded in Buddhism writ large.

In support of a broader perspective, the editors have gathered an impressive array of material. Ritual texts from China, Japan, and Tibet demonstrate continuity rather than disjuncture between mainstream Mahāyāna and tantric practices. Visualization practices reveal perennial questions about the other-worldliness or immanence of various pure lands. As what the editors call a “pan-Asian and deeply entrenched religious phenomenon,” it should be no surprise that Pure Land doctrines have long been in conversation with various Buddhist systems of thought, applied to changing political concerns, adapted to new cultural locations, or used as the basis for secular therapeutic practices. But unlike other forms of Buddhist ascetics, art, and poetry that have captured the Western imagination, Pure Land life-writing and poetry are often creative combinations of fictional and historical events and contain rich accounts of faith and longing for the Pure Land. And, importantly, the very idea of a pure land, ubiquitous across religious traditions, “both challenges and reinforces the uniqueness of Pure Land literature as a useful category,” and so this book speaks to pure lands not only beyond Sukhāvatī, but beyond Buddhism itself.

*Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts* advances Pure Land scholarship by extracting various pure lands from the margins of Buddhist studies. It joins a host of recent scholarship engaged, to varying degrees, in this same project. It is a welcome and much-needed contribution to the Pure Land Buddhist Studies series and to Buddhist scholarship generally.
Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts