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**The Devāsurasamgrāma Myth in Buddhist context: a textual study of the Deva-Asura war narrative in the Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra**

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## Summary

Asuras have long been depicted as primordial antagonistic beings in the religious, mythological, and folkloric traditions of South Asia. Buddhism has integrated these figures since early on and regarded Asuras as warlike demons perpetually engaged in conflict with the gods. This became a Deva-Asura war (*devāsurasamgrāma*) motif that persisted throughout the history of Buddhist literature. This dissertation offers a comprehensive overview of the origin and transformation of the Deva-Asura war motif as attested in early Buddhist scriptures, with the primary focus on the most extensive version of the narrative as found in an encyclopedic Buddhist scripture *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra* (“The Sūtra on the Application of Mindfulness of the True Dharma”, hereafter Sūtra). Early Buddhist Nikāya/Āgama canons as well as Aśvaghōṣa’s writings exemplify the mode of transmission and localization of the Asura figure from pan-Indian cultural substratum into Indian Buddhism. In Buddhist cosmological texts—those of the Sarvāstivāda, (Sarvāstivāda-)Dharmaguptaka, Sāṃmitīya, and Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravāda schools, as well as the Sūtra —Asuras and the Deva-Asura war occupy a stable place. And the Deva-Asura war of the Sūtra has been expanded and sophisticated into a Dharma allegory, expressing didacticism, scholasticism, and polemic. Based on the cosmological texts and the Sūtra, generations of Buddhist mythmakers and storytellers have told and retold the Deva-Asura war meta-myth. In this way, the war narrative has assumed many lives. All in all, the Asuras were not monopolized by Indian Brahmins but also engaged by Indian Buddhists. In the Sūtra, the Deva-Asura war myth functions as an allegory of Buddhism’s invincible cosmic-military power, ethical integrity, and inter-sectarian superiority. To some extent, it provides a mythopolitical framework through which early Indian Buddhists conceptualized the metaphysical nature and moral dynamics of both the macrocosm and the microcosm, and the interconnections between them. Thus, by reconfiguring ancient stories, Buddhist mythmakers sought not only to entertain, but also to cultivate and ultimately to save their audiences.

## Nederlandse samenvatting

Binnen de Zuid-Aziatische religieuze, mythologische en folklorische tradities worden de Asura's doorgaans voorgesteld als primordiale antagonistische wezens. In een vroeg stadium integreerde het boeddhisme deze figuren als krijgshaftige demonen die voortdurend verwickeld zijn in conflicten met de goden. Hieruit ontstond het motief van de Deva-Asura-oorlog (*devāsurasamgrāma*), dat door de gehele geschiedenis van de boeddhistische literatuur heen bleef voortbestaan. Dit proefschrift biedt een omvattend overzicht van de oorsprong en transformatie van het Deva-Asura-oorlog motief, in vroege boeddhistische geschriften. Het geeft bijzondere aandacht voor de meest uitgebreide versie van dit narratief in de encyclopedische boeddhistische tekst *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra* (“Sūtra over de toepassing van aandacht voor de ware Dharma”, hierna: Sūtra). De vroege boeddhistische Nikāya-/Āgama-canon, evenals de werken van Aśvaghōṣa, illustreren de wijze waarop de Asura-figuur werd overgeleverd en gelokaliseerd vanuit een pan-Indisch cultureel gebied binnen het Indiase boeddhisme. In boeddhistische kosmologische teksten, namelijk die van de Sarvāstivāda-, (Sarvāstivāda-)Dharmaguptaka-, Sāmmītiya- en Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravāda-scholen, evenals de Sūtra, nemen de Asura's en de Deva-Asura-oorlog een vaste plaats in. In de Sūtra wordt de Deva-Asura-oorlog bovendien verder uitgewerkt en verfijnd tot een Dharma-allegorie, die didactiek, scholastiek en polemiek benadrukt. Op basis van deze kosmologische teksten en de Sūtra hebben generaties van boeddhistische mythografen en vertellers de meta-mythe van de Deva-Asura-oorlog steeds herverteld. In deze hervertelling nam dit oorlogsverhaal vele gedaantens aan. De Asura's werden niet louter gemonopoliseerd door Indiase brahmanen, maar ook actief betrokken door Indiase boeddhisten. In de Sūtra fungeert de Deva-Asura-oorlog als een allegorie voor de onoverwinnelijke kosmisch-militaire macht, ethische integriteit en inter-sektarische superioriteit van het boeddhisme. In zekere zin biedt zij een mythopolitiek kader waarmee vroege Indiase boeddhisten de metafysische aard en morele dynamiek van zowel de macrokosmos als de microkosmos, evenals hun onderlinge samenhang, conceptualiseerden. Door oude verhalen te herconfigureren, beoogden boeddhistische mythografen derhalve niet alleen te vermaken, maar ook hun publiek te vormen en uiteindelijk te redden.

## Curriculum Vitae

Xiaoqiang Meng was born on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1994 in a small village along the Jing–Hang Grand Canal in Shaoxing (China). After finished his high school in 2013, he came to Nankai University, Tianjin, to pursue a BA degree in History. He focused on the Mongol–Yuan dynasty and maritime silk road in the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in 2017, his BA thesis obtained the Honors B.A. thesis of Universities in Tianjin, and he was awarded the title of university outstanding graduate. From 2017 to 2020, he changed his academic focus to Sanskrit literature and Buddhist manuscriptology, and studied Sanskrit and Tibetan languages at Fudan University, Shanghai, focusing on Kṣemendra’s *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* as his MA research topic. In 2020, he obtained his MA degree in Buddhist Studies and was awarded the title of university outstanding graduate. Afterwards, in 2020, he came to the Netherlands to pursue a PhD degree in Buddhist Studies. Sponsored by Khyentse Foundation and later briefly by the J. Gonda Fund Foundation, he studied at the Leiden Institute for Area Studies (LIAS) and concentrated on Buddhist mythology and cosmology, based on manuscript reading and philological studies of the Buddhist scripture *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra*. During his six years in Leiden, he also studied in the online program “MA in South Asian Languages and Cultures: Jainism and its Languages,” Ghent University, Belgium. He attended Winter or Summer Schools in Pune (online), London, Venice, Vienna, Paris, and also in Leiden. From February to June 2024, he made an academic stay at the Departments of Buddhology and Tibetology and Indian Studies (BTK), Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. And he attended and made presentations at academic conferences about thirteen times in Vienna, Berlin, Budapest, St. Andrews, Dubrovnik, Tusk, Evanston, Munich, Freiburg im Breisgau, Erlangen, Heidelberg, Kathmandu, and Denver. He taught a BA seminar at Leiden University. He was a member of the PhD Council of the LIAS, the Khyentse Foundation Buddhist Studies Lecture Series at Northwestern University, and the program “Ambassadors of Early Music,” the Festival Oude Muziek, Utrecht. During his PhD, he published two peer-reviewed articles (in the *Indogermanische Forschungen* and *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia*), one peer-reviewed article for the conference proceedings *Puṣpikā*, and one academic translation.