

## 14<sup>th</sup> World Sanskrit Conference/Kyōto Sept. 1–5, 2009

Section: Buddhist Studies

Panel: Scriptural authority and apologetics in the Indian religio-philosophical environment

### *Sūtra* vs. *śāstra*: a sociological perspective

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When the authors find themselves in need of bolstering the legitimacy of their cause, their writings afford a particularly good vantage on the *Sitz im Leben* of the genres they produce. By careful observation of the different strategies used in two different literary genres we can begin to discern not only a distinction in stakes, but also a distinction in the sites in which the struggle was expected to be played out. The result is that a careful analysis of genre can reveal important things about the social niche in which our literatures were expected to function. The struggle of Mahāyāna Buddhists to garner legitimacy for the movement was waged primarily in four genres: *sūtra*, *śāstra*, *jātaka/avadāna* and *stotra*. In this paper, I will focus on the distinguishing rhetorical and strategic features of select Mahāyāna *sūtras* and Mahāyāna *śāstras* from the First Century to the Fifth Century. I will outline not only the two distinctive social niches that each occupied but also how the social significance of these niches evolves over time and geography. I will argue that, while both genres seek to secure what Randall Collins calls “attention space” for Mahāyāna, their respective gambits for attention are played out in two very different architectural spaces: one in the monastic courtyard or *caitya* hall and the other in the preceptor’s cell and in extra monastic civic space. The constraints provided by the practicalities of these respective social spaces on the production and reproduction of ideas within each genre, in turn play an important role in the strategic options that form the distinctive characteristics of Mahāyāna *sūtra* and *śāstra* apologetics.