The term “medium” or “spirit-medium” translates (or approximates) the Chinese term (*wu* 卦), which has often been—problematically, in most cases—rendered as “shaman.” Mediums are those who served as intermediaries between living humans and dead ancestors or deities. They can be men or women and adults or children. While spirit-medi ums are best known for their role within what has come to be called China’s “common religion,” they have also played a role in Daoist and Buddhist history, and they continue to function up to the present day in China, Taiwan, and Chinese diaspora communities. Spirit-mediums can be associated with urban or rural temples or they may work out of their own homes, particularly those practicing at the village level, where they maintain their own altars (*tan* 坛).

Anthropologists have tried to provide some analytic clarity to a cluster of terms used to label similar phenomena involving the descent of a spirit or deity into a host. Raymond Firth, for example, has attempted to draw a line of demarcation between “spirit possession,” “spirit-mediumship,” and “shamanism.” Firth understands “spirit possession” as designating “phenomena of abnormal behavior which are interpreted by other members of the society as evidence that a spirit is controlling the person’s actions and probably inhabiting his body.” “Spirit-mediumship” for him is the use of such behavior by members of the society as a means of communication with what they understand to be entities in the spirit world… the behaviour of the person possessed by the spirit must be intelligible or able to be interpreted; this implies that it must follow some fairly regular, predictable pattern, usually of speech. (Firth 1967, 296)

Firth applies the term “shamanism” “to those phenomena where a person, either a spirit-medium or not, is regarded as controlling spirits [and] exercising his mastery over them in socially recognized ways.” As potentially useful as these distinctions might be, they do not capture well the diversity of phenomena encountered in the Chinese religious context—where there is slippage between these categories—and anthropologists researching the religious practices found in other cultures have noted similar limitations.
There is evidence of mediumistic practices found in Chinese antiquity, though its complicated history—and the appropriate choice of terminology to describe it—is still a much-debated topic (Puett 2004, von Falkenhausen 1995). There has been a general tendency, perhaps following the pejorative view of Confucians, to treat spirit-mediumship as a debased form of religious practice, in opposition to what are perceived to be the refined traditions of Daoism and Buddhism (Sutton 2000). Yet when we turn to pre-modern Chinese Buddhist materials, we find some rather systematic treatments of spirit-mediums. Michel Strickmann, for instance, has proposed that one of the earliest Buddhist texts describing the use of a medium in the context of spirit-possession is the Amoghapāśa sūtra (Bukong juansuo tuoluoni zizaiwang zhou jing 不空闡提佛陀尼自在王呪經, T. 1097) translated in the late seventh or early eighth century (Strickmann 2002). The relevant portion of that text says:

If it is desired to enchant a person, the spell possessor should bathe himself and put on fresh garments. Next he should recite the spirit-spell to protect his own person. Then he is to construct a ritual area using cow dung, making it square and painting it in the appropriate colors, strewing assorted flowers, and setting out various white-colored food offerings. Next he should take a virgin boy or girl, bathe the child, and imbue its body with fine fragrances. He should clothe it in a pure white garment and adorn it with all manner of ornaments. He should then have the child sit cross-legged in the ritual area; he recites the spell bandha (“bind”) and he plaits the child’s hair. When he is done reciting the spell and plaing the hair, he takes more flowers and fills the child’s hands with them. In addition, he takes fine quality incense, crushes and scatters it. Then, additionally, he recites a spell over uncooked rice, which he sprinkles, together with flowers and water, within the ritual area. Next he should burn sandalwood incense and recite Guanyin’s spirit-spell; he should recite it three times over the flowers and then cast them in the child’s face. Then the child’s body will begin to tremble. If you wish it to speak, pronounce another spell [given in the text] over pure water and sprinkle it in its face. As you recite the spell, be sure that your hand does not touch the child. When you have recited in this manner, the child will speak. If you ask about good or evil things in the past, future, or present, it will be able to answer all your questions. If the spell holder wishes to send away the spirit who has lodged in the child, there is another spell given which he should recite. (Strickmann 2002, 204–205).

This passage serves well as a paradigmatic example of spirit-mediumship, involving an elaborate ritual context, the use of a child as the host, and the ability to make the host issue an oral prognostication. During the Tang dynasty, especially during the seventh and eighth