Late Tang esoteric Buddhism, relative to its Japanese offspring, has been neglected. In part this has to do with the sources. In contrast to the rich documentation on Amoghavajra (Bukong jin’gang 不空金剛 704–774), we know little directly about his descendants, and most of the information we do have stems from accounts of Japanese pilgrims. We also have texts and ritual manuals, though their provenance is seldom clear. Furthermore, with a few exceptions, studies have been hampered by agendas originating in Japan rather than in China. These have included taxonomic schemes (seijun mikkyō 正純密教/zōbu mikkyō 雑部密教, for instance) designed to segregate the Mahāvairocana-abhisambodhi sūtra (MVS) and the Sarvatathāgatabhisaṁgraha (STTS) from the larger mantric and Mahāyāna context for purposes of sectarian legitimization. The most obvious of these agendas—the “holy grail” of Mikkyō scholarship concerning China—has been repeated attempts to locate the origin of Japan’s “dual mandala” tradition either in the work of Amoghavajra or Huiguo 惠果 (746–806), his disciple and the teacher of Kūkai 空海 (779–835).5 Such
"pre-interpretative decisions" have resulted in a relatively paucity of in-depth studies of ninth-century "Tangmi".

The Genealogy of Yoga

The genealogical claims of the Yoga (yuqie 瑜伽) grounded in the STTS and taught by Vajrabodhi (Jin’gang zhi 金剛智 671–741) and Amoghavajra are distinct from typical Buddhist claims of a teaching propounded by Śākyamuni transcribed in texts and transmitted through generations of disciples. Indeed, through the ritual of abhiṣeka (guanding 灌頂) disciples directly recapitulate initiation and instruction by Mahāvairocana Buddha and Vajrasattva, effectively rewriting the genealogy of Buddhism. The mythic counterpart to this ritual genealogy is the tale of a devout disciple who long ago journeyed to an “iron stūpa” (tieta 鐵塔) where he performed homa (fire oblation) and circumambulation, and, when the stūpa miraculously opened, he entered. Once inside, the disciple was instructed and he exited with the STTS (Orzech 1995, 314–17; 1998, 149–50). The story was recounted variously by Amoghavajra and his disciples, Kūkai, and in numerous retellings thereafter. Amoghavajra’s version of the story is supposedly based on the oral teaching of his master, Vajrabodhi. Each disciple undergoing abhiṣeka and instruction ritually recapitulates this event.

The authors argue that an “offering” bodhisattva on a pedestal was proof of the Tang provenance of the dual mandala configuration. Other scholars hotly contested this, and on examination it is apparent that the claim is a bit of a stretch. See, for instance, Eugene Y. Wang 2005. This is not to say that elements from both the MVS and STTS cycles are not present; indeed, they are. But their presence is no more than proof that late Tang Buddhism—especially imperially sponsored Buddhism—incorporated esoteric elements drawn from both ritual cycles, just as did that of Amoghavajra, Huiguo, and Faquan. The assumption of a “dual mandala” à la certain strands of the Shingon tradition is an unnecessary imposition on the data and obscures the range of developments in the ninth century.

6 Smith 1988, 66.
7 See Orzech, “Vajrabodhi,” in this volume.
8 See the discussion of this distinction in Abé 1999, 127–49.