Amoghavajra (704–774 C.E.; Amuqubazheluo 阿目佉跋折羅; Bukong 㝼င’gang 不空 金剛 or Bukong 不空) was born in Samarkand; his father was an Indian merchant or brahmin, and his mother was of Sogdian origin. There are several contradictory accounts on the place of his birth, the status of his parents, the circumstances under which he became a Buddhist monk, and the way he came to China (see Chou 1945, 285, 321). According to the account by Yuanzhao 昂照 (719–800 C.E.), Amoghavajra met Vajrabodhi (671–741 C.E.) in Java and became his disciple in 717 at the age of fourteen. Together they traveled to China, and they arrived in the Tang capital Chang’an in 721 (T. 2157.55: 881a). At the age of twenty, Amoghavajra was fully ordained but he was denied access to the advanced ritual knowledge of yoga covered in the STTS. As he intended to return to India in order to pursue further studies, Vajrabodhi decided to consecrate Amoghavajra in the practice of the STTS, the Mahāvairocana sūtra, and also in the abhisêka and homa rites (T. 2056.50:292c). Shortly after Vajrabodhi’s death in 741, Amoghavajra went to Ceylon and India to collect manuscripts and to complete his ritual expertise. He came to know the disintegration of Indian royal order into the medieval warring states, the crisis of monastic institutions, and the Buddhist contribution to tantric ritualism (see Davidson 2002, 26–168).

After his return to Chang’an in 746, Amoghavajra was ordered by Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 713–756 C.E.) to serve in the office of the Court of State Ceremonial, to conduct the emperor’s abhisêka (guanding 灌頂), and to perform apotropaic rituals. Vested with imperial honors, Amoghavajra was repeatedly assigned to perform abhisêka ceremonies for officials and military leaders, including, for example, the governor-general Geshu Han 哥舒翰 (d. 757 C.E.), who in 754 ordered him to translate the STTS (T. 865) and to conduct mass consecrations in the yoga of the Vajradhātu Mandala for his troops (BDJ (1974) 4385b).
Beginning in 756 Amoghavajra resided at Daxingshan Monastery 大興善寺 (Wang 1986), where he remained during the rebellion of General An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757 C.E.). In the summer of that same year, the rebel armies took Chang’an shortly after the emperor’s flight to Chengdu. The crown prince, Li Heng 李亨, escaped northward to Lingwu (in modern-day Ningxia) and formed an alliance with Tibetan and Uighur forces, preparing to recapture imperial authority after Xuanzong’s abdication. He succeeded the following year and ascended the throne of the rapidly disintegrating Tang empire as Emperor Suzong 蕭宗 (r. 756–762 C.E.). The devastated capital was wracked by famine and epidemic plagues, and millions died—estimated at two-thirds of the total population on the tax rolls—resulting in a ruinous drop of tax revenue. The central government was forced to depend on foreign allies, military leaders, and provincial governors. Suzong and his successor Daizong 代宗 (r. 762–779 C.E.) found themselves without much political and economic control. Former rebels had to be pardoned and reinstalled into government posts, while allied foreign troops began raiding Tang territory, threatening the continuance of the dynasty (Dalby 1979).

Under these adverse conditions, Amoghavajra managed to gain the emperors’ trust. Taking into account the severe crisis of imperial sovereignty, he adapted Buddhism as a repository of ritual services at the court (Orzech 1998). Though he received and instrumentalized imperial patronage, he did not establish a specific Buddhist denomination. The inclusivist approach and the scarcity of self-referential distinctions characteristic of Amoghavajra’s writings indicate that he warranted the formation and purpose of his ritual services as features of the Mahāyāna (Sharf 2002a), emphasizing metaphors of universal sovereignty and state protection (Orzech 2003).

In order to underscore his ritual expertise in the STTS, however, Amoghavajra distinguished the “great teaching of yoga” (yuqie dajiao 瑜伽大教) by reference to the designation jin’gangsheng 金剛乘 (Vajrayāna, “Adamantine Vehicle”; Orzech 2006a, 46–52). In the Encomium on a General Interpretation of the Meaning of Dhārani (Zongshi tuoluoni yizan 總釋陀羅尼義讚; T. 902.18:898; McBride 2004), a short tract attributed to Amoghavajra, formations of mantric speech were classified as the all-inclusive cause and immediate agency of Mahāyāna praxis. The Treatise on the Production of the Thought of Anuttara Samyaksambodhi in the Adamantine Pinnacle Yoga (Jin’gangding yuqie zhong fa anouduluo sanmiao sanputi xin lun