Among the different rituals dealing with both the benign and dangerous dead in Chinese Buddhism, rituals for feeding hungry ghosts (shì egui 施餓鬼) are often associated with the esoteric rubric. While most of these rituals operate under the normative understanding of merit-transfer—often mediated by monastics—translations of the Foshuo jiuba yankou egui tuoluoni jīng 佛說救拔焰口餓鬼陀羅尼經 (Sūtra Spoken by the Buddha on the Dhārani that Rescued Flaming-mouth Hungry Ghost, hereafter Flaming Mouth Sūtra, T. 1313.21:464b–465b) in the eighth century introduced the Chinese to a different Buddhist motif and method for human-ghost interactions.¹ This sūtra teaches the use of an incantation (dhārani) for transforming ordinary food and drink into nourishment capable of satisfying innumerable hungry ghosts. Thus, added to the belief in merit-transfer is this more direct and immediate way of satiating the hunger of the dead. Inspired by the Flaming Mouth Sūtra, various types of ghost-feeding rituals of varying lengths and complexity later developed and proliferated in China and other areas within its cultural orbit. These ghost-feeding rituals still figure prominently in the ritual lives of many Buddhists in East Asia today.

As important as the translations of this sūtra eventually became, it is unclear if they made any immediate impact on Tang Buddhist communities. Evidence regarding initial reception of the translations is surprisingly sparse. Although the Flaming Mouth Sūtra contains

¹ There are two translations of this text: the Foshuo jiu mianran egui tuoluoni shenzhou jīng 佛說救面燃餓鬼陀羅尼神咒經 (Sūtra Spoken by the Buddha on the Dhārani-spell that Saved Scorched-face Hungry Ghost), T. 1314.21:465c–466b, translated by Śiksānanda (652–710) between the years 700–704; and the Foshuo jiuba yankou egui tuoluoni jīng 佛說救拔焰口餓鬼陀羅尼經 (Sūtra Spoken by the Buddha on the Dhārani that Rescued Flaming-mouth Hungry Ghost) T. 1313.21:464b–465b, translated by Amoghavajra (705–774) half a century later. Amoghavajra’s version clarifies some ambiguous parts in Śiksānanda’s translation and has some added material. Since the latter translation became more widely used, for the remainder of this article I will refer to this sūtra as the Flaming Mouth Sūtra. For a translation of T. 1313, see Orzech 1996b.
simple instructions on how to put the incantation to use, it lacks the qualities of an esoteric-type vidhi/kalpa, liturgies or ritual manuals for the performance of esoteric practices. The sole notable exception, which likely originated in the Tang and has been identified with Amoghavajra, is the Shi zhu egui yinshi ji shui fa施諸餌鬼飲食及水法 (Bestowing Drink and Food to all Hungry Ghosts and the Water Method, hereafter Bestowing Drink and Food, T. 1315.21:466c–468b). Though the Tang provenance of this text is unproblematic, its connection to Amoghavajra is tenuous. Neither the Kaiyuan shijiao lu開元釋教錄 (T. 2154.55:477a–723a), completed in 730, nor the Zhenyuan xinding shijiao mulu貞元新定釋教目録, completed in 800, lists this text. Furthermore, there are no references to the performance of any ghost-feeding rituals in the collection of important documents on Amoghavajra’s activities in China compiled by Yuanzhao 圓照 (d. 800). If Amoghavajra and his immediate disciples did perform ghost-feeding rituals based on the Flaming Mouth Sūtra, they were at best only ancillary to other rituals deemed more central and noteworthy.

While Tang evidence for ghost-feeding rituals are scant, the picture changes when we enter the Song period. The earliest Chinese evidence of the practice of the Flaming Mouth Sūtra comes from Song Tiantai communities in the form of two collections: the Jinyuan ji 金園集 (Golden Garden Collection, X. 950: 57.1a–20b), compiled by Ciyun Zunshi 慈雲尊式 (964–1032); and the Shishi tonglan 施食通覽 (Survey of Food-bestowal Rituals, X. 961: 57.101b–121a) completed in 1204 by Zongxiao 宗曉 (1154–1214). Unlike the Tang material, these Tiantai texts have clearly identifiable social, historical, and sectarian contexts. Consequently, any attempt to understand this facet of esoteric Buddhism in China has to begin with an analysis of these materials and the people who generated them.

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2 This liturgy was transmitted to Japan and became part of the ritual practices of the Shingon tradition.

3 Daizong chao zengsi kong dadianzheng guangzhi sanzang heshang biaoizhiji 代宗朝贈司空大辨正廣智三藏和上表制集 (T. 2120.52:826c–860c), completed in 781. Although the provenance of the Bestowing Drink and Food remains problematic, Ennin, who traveled in China from 838–847 and returned to Japan with this liturgy, identified it as Amoghavajra’s “oral instructions” (Bukong sanzang koujue 不空三藏口诀), an attribution repeated in a Dunhuang manuscript of the Method of Bestowing Drink and Food. See Nittō shingu shōgyō mokuroku 入唐新求聖教目録 (T. 2176.55:1080c).