Convergences, Esoteric Buddhism, Daoism, and Popular Religion
Talismans, which are generally understood to be powerful objects that include esoteric diagrams or forms of writing emblazoned on paper, wood, clay, metal, or cloth, are found in many of the world’s religious traditions. These objects are usually ingested, worn or impressed on the body, buried, or hung up in a home, monastery, or burial chamber. Talismans are perceived to have powers to impel what is desired and expel anything that is malicious or dangerous, including disease-causing demons or other harmful specters.¹

There is an extensive body of literature on the history and function of talismans in China (and Chinese diaspora communities), though until recently the bulk of that research has focused on pre-Daoist and Daoist talismans, and there has remained a paucity of detailed research on Buddhist talismans (Despeux 2000; Drexler 1994; Mollier 2004; Robinet 1993; Ledderose 1984; Chaves 1977; Ōgata Tōru et al. 2005; Sawada Mizuho 1984; Wang Yucheng 1991a, 1991b, 1998). Recent research has demonstrated that although talismans are found with less frequency in the Buddhist canon (Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新修大藏経, hereafter Taishō) than in the Daoist canon (Zheng-tong Daozang 正統道藏, hereafter Daozang), one place where they do appear with some regularity is in Buddhist texts that have been conventionally associated with esoteric Buddhism (Strickmann 2002; Robson 2008).²

The Chinese term for “talisman” (fu 符) can be traced back to its original use in the context of Han dynasty imperial treasure objects, where the term referred to two halves of an object, usually in the shape of a dragon, fish, or tiger that was split down the middle and inscribed on the back. Two parties entering into a contract would each keep a

¹ This article is based on a longer treatment of the subject of talismanic writing within Chinese Buddhism in Robson 2008.
² See, for example, the large number of entries in Giles 1957 that either mention talismans (fu) in the title or are described as being magical charms (by which Giles usually refers to talismans). See also the charm and references to other recently discovered charms in Atkinson 1994, 296–298.