



**HAL**  
open science

## Talismans

Christine Mollier

► **To cite this version:**

| Christine Mollier. Talismans. 2021. hal-03094639

**HAL Id: hal-03094639**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03094639>**

Preprint submitted on 4 Jan 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

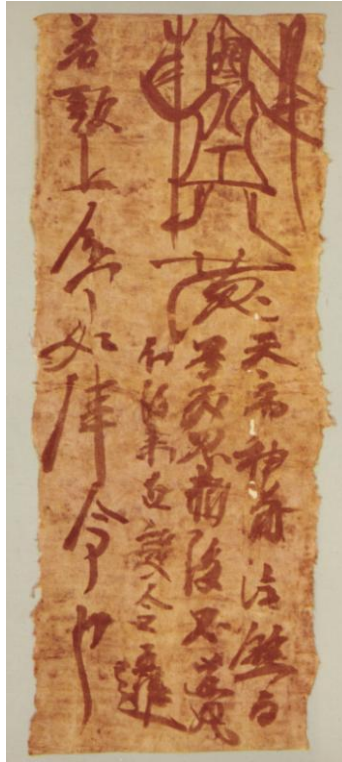
**Christine Mollier**  
CNRS/CRCAO, Paris

*Encyclopaedia of Manuscripts Cultures in Asia and Africa*, Michael Friedrich, Harunaga Isaacson and Jörg B. Quenzer, Berlin: de Gruyter. **À paraître**

### **Talismans**

Chinese talismans, *fu* 符, are esoteric scripts written or engraved on diverse supports such as paper, wood, metal or pottery, which are invested with prophylactic, therapeutic or exorcistic powers. In use since the second century C.E., talismans have been continuously and abundantly produced down to the present day. The most ancient examples are found on funerary jars and wooden documents discovered in Latter Han tombs. During medieval times, Taoist and Buddhist clerics as well as diviners, astrologists, medicine men, and other traditional scientists created them for the purpose of expelling the demonic, curing patients or granting divine protection to individuals. Thus, the talisman became the primary, indispensable ritual technology for minor rites and great liturgies. Talismans owe their charisma essentially to the archetypal and transcendental values traditionally granted to Chinese written characters. Their archaic graphs, difficult for non-initiates to decipher, as is still the case today, sometimes incorporate stellar diagrams, or, more rarely, iconographic depictions.

Written and consecrated according to specific rites and prescriptions, apotropaic talismans are, depending on their purpose, worn as amulets, reduced to ashes to be swallowed, fixed on strategic points of housing or sacred areas, concealed in tombs, or engraved on seals of wood permitting their duplication.



**Fig. 1 :** Talisman discovered in a tomb dated 551 C.E. (Astana, Turfan)  
27, 5 / 10 cm

The innumerable models for talismans found in the Taoist canons, and those which, to a lesser extent, figure in Buddhist environments, particularly in Tantric texts, are meant to be copied by duly accredited practitioners. Rare, however, are extant examples of consecrated, « operational » paper talismans dating to the medieval period : the most ancient paper talisman-amulet known today dates to the mid-sixth century (fig. 1). Entitled the « divine talisman of the Celestial emperor » (*tiandi shenfu* 天帝神符), it was brought to light in a tomb located in the necropolis of Astana near Turfan (actual province of Xinjiang).



**Fig. 3 :** Manual of talismans for the household's protection  
Dunhuang, tenth century, P. 3358

Another example, discovered at Cave 17 in Dunhuang, is a tenth-century Buddhist dhâranî-talisman with polychromatic images of astrological deities (Stein painting 170). Dunhuang collections have also preserved talismanic rituals issued by officials expert in mantic techniques or by military officers of the region, as well as some catalogues of *fu* produced by local diviners. The tenth-century manual Pelliot 3358, for example, contains a series of about twenty models for talismans, sometimes accompanied with instructions concerning their fabrication and function. These talismans are intended to protect the family against domestic problems such as disease, familial conflict, poor harvests, infertility, and nightmares (fig. 2).