

Sino-Iranica

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INTRODUCTION

If we knew as much about the culture of ancient Iran as about ancient Egypt or Babylonia, or even as much as about India or China, our notions of cultural developments in Asia would probably be widely different from what they are at present. The few literary remains left to us in the Old-Persian inscriptions and in the Avesta are insufficient to retrace an adequate picture of Iranian life and civilization; and, although the records of the classical authors add a few touches here and there to this fragment, any attempts at reconstruction, even combined with these sources, will remain unsatisfactory. During the last decade or so, thanks to a benign dispensation of fate, the Iranian horizon has considerably widened: important discoveries made in Chinese Turkistan have revealed an abundant literature in two hitherto unknown Iranian languages,— the Sogdian and the so-called Eastern Iranian.¹ We now know that Iranian peoples once covered an immense territory, extending all over Chinese Turkistan, migrating into China, coming in contact with Chinese, and exerting a profound influence on nations of other stock, notably Turks and Chinese. The Iranians were the great mediators between the West and the East, conveying the heritage of Hellenistic ideas to central and eastern Asia and transmitting valuable plants and goods of China to the Mediterranean area. Their activity is of world-historical significance, but without the records of the Chinese we should be unable to grasp the situation thoroughly. The Chinese were positive utilitarians and always interested in matters of reality: they have bequeathed to us a great amount of useful information on Iranian plants, products, animals, minerals, customs, and institutions, which is bound to be of great service to science.

The following pages represent Chinese contributions to the history of civilization in Iran, which aptly fill a lacune in our knowledge of Iranian tradition. Chinese records dealing with the history of Iranian peoples also contain numerous transcriptions of ancient Iranian words,

¹ Cf., for instance, P. PELLLOT, *Influences iraniennes en Asie centrale et en Extrême-Orient* (Paris, 1911).