

plants that I had known in Kashmīr. On ascending one of these ridges to a height of about 8,000 feet for a plane-table fixing, the valley of Ma-ti-ssü came into full view, flanked to the west by bold rock walls of sandstone (Fig. 261). Cropping out from the thick layers of loess that clothe the slopes elsewhere, these cliffs rose in places almost vertically and with their vivid red or yellow colour stood out in brilliant contrast to the rich green of the rest of the scene. The snow-filled ravines of the high spur to the south, and some snow-clad peaks of the main range clearly visible to the south-east, added their share to the glory of this panorama. As I turned my eyes from this feast of rich colours and the luxuriance of plant life in the foreground to where the dark range rising across the great plain of the Kan-chou valley limited the horizon northward, it seemed hard to believe that beyond it lay, so near comparatively, those barren wastes of sand and decomposed rock of southern Mongolia from which we had but recently escaped.

Descending along the crest of the loess ridge we found it all laid out in fields, but most of these abandoned many years ago to luxuriant herbage. It was evidently a case of deficient labour, perhaps mainly a result of the depopulation which in these parts, too, had followed the Tungan rebellion. When lower down on the slope we came upon fields actually under oat crops it was interesting to note that the burly couple cultivating them were not Chinese but 'Hsi-fan' or Tangut, and that their 'farm' consisted of caves cut from the loess bank, exactly in the fashion typical of the great loess region of true China. We heard of more Hsi-fan cultivators established higher up in these valleys, clear evidence that this Tibetan race, though still mainly nomadic, is as capable now of settling down to agricultural life as it probably was in the days when kings of their stock held sway over most of the Kan-su marches.

Abandoned
fields on
loess ridge.

When, descending westwards, we had reached the Ma-ti-ssü valley and had crossed the lively stream that flows at its bottom, the full picturesqueness of the sacred site was revealed. A cluster of flat-roofed quarters, with small chapels of Tibetan type interspersed, composed the chief monastic establishment. It was sensibly established near the stream, and was conveniently placed, too, for the herds of yaks that play an important part in the domestic economy of the convent. When the dozens and dozens of red-robed Lamas who inhabit it turned out to greet us, there was no mistaking the fact that Ma-ti-ssü, as a sanctuary 'in being', bears aspects entirely Hsi-fan. On ascending to the largest of the shrines built on a terrace about a hundred feet higher up, we found that, though the structure itself with its splendour of polychrome woodwork and its roofs elaborately decorated in carved bricks and pottery was quite Chinese in style, the interior displayed all the paraphernalia of Tibetan Buddhist worship. The rock walls behind this shrine are less steep and exposed than those farther up to the north. Perhaps for this reason they hold, instead of cave-shrines, a series of colossal relievo representations of Stūpas placed within niches. Owing to the luxuriant tree growth at the foot and even in the fissures of the rock face it was difficult to get a near view of these relievos, of which nearly a score could be counted. In general type they recalled the structural Stūpas that I saw in 1907 at Ch'iao-tzū, which may well date like the ruined town near them from Hsi-hsia times.¹

Monastery
of Ma-ti-ssü

I had already seen from afar a series of cave-shrines honeycombing the wall of bare sandstone where it rises with an almost perpendicular face behind another conspicuous shrine built on the wooded slope about half a mile northward. Ascending this slope by a footpath leading through a beautiful forest, in which tall firs intermingled with leafy trees, we passed two decayed Stūpas of Tibetan type on a small wooded spur. From there a full view was obtained both of the upper temple and of the cave-shrines rising in a succession of stories behind it (Fig. 271). The temple comprised three halls rising one above the other on terraced courts (Fig. 269), all built in Chinese

Upper
temple
below cave-
shrines.

¹ See *Serindia*, iii. p. 1104, Fig. 237.