

which by then had once more resumed its air of utter desolation and silence, and established my camp there for a prolonged stay, I confess what kept my heart buoyant were hopes of another kind. Very soon after my first arrival at Tun-huang a vague rumour had reached me about a great mass of ancient manuscripts which had been discovered by chance several years before hidden away in one of the cave temples. There they were reported to be guarded by a Taoist priest who had come upon them in a walled-up side chapel while restoring that temple. He was supposed to have locked them up under an official order, and there were reasons for caution in endeavours to secure access to the trove.

On my first visit to the caves the Taoist priest or Tao-shih, Wang by name (Fig. 85), was away on a begging tour in the oasis. So I had to rest content at the time with ascertaining from a young Tangutan monk, then the solitary dweller at the site, that the place of discovery of the manuscript hoard was a large shrine near the northern end of the main group of caves. The entrance had been formerly blocked by fallen rock debris and drift sand. While the priest was slowly carrying on the restorations upon which he was engaged for years with pious zeal and devotion, a crack in the frescoed wall of the passage revealed an opening that led to a small chamber excavated from the rock behind.

It was said to have been completely filled with manuscript rolls, written in Chinese characters but in what was supposed to be a non-Chinese language. The hoard, estimated at several cart-loads, was now guarded behind a carefully locked door with which the recess had been furnished. All I could see of it then was a long and excellently preserved