

number of stories, had modern antechapels built in front, of gaily painted timber and profusely decked with Chinese inscriptions on scarlet paper.

Surely it was the sight of these colossal images, some reaching nearly a hundred feet in height, and the vivid first impressions retained of the cult paid to them, which had made Marco Polo put into his chapter on 'Sachiu,' *i.e.* Tun-huang, a long account of the strange idolatrous customs of the people of Tangut. "The Idolaters have a peculiar language, and are no traders, but live by their agriculture. They have a great many abbeys and minsters full of idols of sundry fashions, to which they pay great honour and reverence, worshipping them and sacrificing to them with much ado," and so on.

Tun-huang manifestly had managed to retain its traditions of Buddhist piety down to Marco's days. Yet there was plentiful antiquarian evidence showing that most of the shrines and art remains at the Halls of the Thousand Buddhas dated back to the period of the T'ang dynasty, when Buddhism flourished greatly in China. Tun-huang, as the westernmost outpost of China proper, had then for nearly two centuries enjoyed imperial protection both against the Turks in the north and the Tibetans southward. But during the succeeding period, until the advent of paramount Mongol power, some two generations before Marco Polo's visit, these marches had been exposed to barbarian inroads of all sorts. The splendour of the temples and the number of the monks and nuns established near them had, no doubt, sadly diminished in the interval.

As I passed hurriedly from grotto to grotto, faithfully followed by my literatus, we were at last joined by one of the local priests I had been looking out for. It was a young 'Ho-shang,' left in charge of the conglomeration of small houses and chapels which occupied a place amidst some arbours and fields facing the south end of the grottoes (Fig. 186). He was a quiet, intelligent fellow, quick at grasping what attracted my interest, and as unobtrusive a cicerone as one could wish for. His face showed scarcely any Chinese feature, and like so many physiognomies seen