

With the ruined line of wall we had traced in the desert of Tun-huang local Chinese scholarship had evidently never concerned itself, and later on Chiang, when at home, vainly searched the volume even for a mere reference. It was the old story of antiquaries, absorbed in their book-lore, not heeding to look for the realities of the past in the open. When I thought of the physical conditions prevailing on the desert ground I was eager to search, I could scarcely blame Chinese confrères for not having cared to explore it before me. Nor could I complain of any indifference on the part of my hosts when I explained to them the operations I was planning about those ruins. Chiang had told them a good deal since our first visits about my methods of work and the success which had rewarded them elsewhere, and with that historical curiosity which seems innate in every educated Chinaman, they were manifestly agreed that I should try my luck here too.

But when, in the course of our dinner talk, it came to discussing the practical arrangements needed for my proposed excavations, I realized that there were difficulties ahead such as on Turkestan soil no Amban had ever hinted at. Wang Ta-lao-ye gravely told me that he scarcely knew how to provide the dozen diggers I had mentioned as the minimum required for my first prospecting. Ever since the great devastations of the Tungan rebellion, the population of the oasis had remained very low, and the supply of agricultural labour extremely scanty. The cultivators owned their land. However small their holdings, to make them move out into the desert for digging would be a hopeless attempt, whatever the season and whatever pay might be offered; for Tun-huang people all loved their ease dearly, and having no struggle for existence to face were proof equally against official pressure and the desire of gain.

Besides, they were all and sundry confirmed opium-smokers, and as such most unwilling under any conditions to submit to a rough life in the open. It was the same with the few men available for hire as day labourers, a hopelessly inert set of wastrels, not likely to forsake easy