

indefatigable in exhorting and watching the coolies, pouncing upon and cleaning every dirt-encrusted 'tzü' or writing with the utmost keenness. I could safely leave him and Naik Ram Singh to continue operations, while I myself set out for a preliminary inspection of the two remaining watch-towers visible south-westwards. By the time I returned from this reconnaissance the clearing of the whole of the refuse layers was completed, and the total number of inscribed pieces had risen to over seventy.

Only two of the records were fully dated, the year named corresponding to 75 A.D., and thus showing that the relics of this watch-station likewise went back to the Eastern Han dynasty. I could not doubt for a moment that the full interpretation of these records would need protracted study, and would tax the philological acumen even of so eminent a Sinologist as my friend M. Chavannes, for whom I destined them from the first. Chiang himself modestly disclaimed the capacity of solving the many puzzles in palaeographic features and in diction which the text of the tablets offered. Many of them, besides, were incomplete. Yet even his cursory examination sufficed to show that the records varied greatly in character. Brief reports on matters of military administration along the line of watch-stations; acknowledgments of receipt for articles of equipment, etc.; private communications; fragments of literary texts; even writing exercises seemed to be represented. But on all such points definite information came only through M. Chavannes' labours; and for a general survey of the results which his unsurpassed learning and critical penetration secured from the materials discovered at this and other ancient stations along the wall, I must refer to a subsequent chapter.

It was far easier, of course, to become familiar on the spot with the external or stationery aspect of these miscellaneous 'papers,' to use an anachronism, the earliest of Chinese written records known till then. The most usual form was that of the thin wooden slip measuring when intact about nine to nine and a half inches long and from a quarter to half an inch wide (see Fig. 119). That some of the complete slips often contained over thirty Chinese