

cella of the cave-temple, where they might have been examined at ease, would have been premature; so much oppressed at the time was Wang Tao-shih by fears of losing his position—and patrons—by the rumours which any casual observers might spread against him in the oasis. So for the present I had to rest content with his offer to take out a bundle or two at a time, and to let us look rapidly through their contents in a less cramped part of the precincts. Fortunately the restorations carried out by him, besides the fine loggia already mentioned, included a kind of large antechapel, having on either side a small room provided with a door and paper-covered windows. So here a convenient 'reading-room' was at hand for this strange old library, where we were screened from any inquisitive eyes, even if an occasional worshipper dropped in to 'kotow' before the huge and ugly Buddha statue now set up in the temple.

While the Tao-shih was engaged in digging out a few bundles, I closely examined the passage wall behind which this great deposit of manuscripts had been hidden. The priest had told us that, when he first settled at the 'Thousand Buddhas' some eight years before, he found the entrance to this cave-temple almost completely blocked by drift sand. Judging from the condition of other caves near by and the relatively low level of this particular temple, it is probable that this accumulation of drift sand rose to ten feet or more at the entrance. Keeping only a few labourers at work from the proceeds of pious donations, at first coming dribble-like with lamentable slowness, our Tao-shih had taken two or three years to lay bare the whole of the broad passage, some forty feet deep. When this task had been accomplished, and while engaged in setting up new statues in place of the decayed old stucco images occupying the dais of the cella, he had noticed a small crack in the frescoed wall to the right of the passage. There appeared to be a recess behind the plastered surface instead of the solid conglomerate from which the cella and its approach are hewn; and on widening the opening he discovered the small room with its deposit such as I now saw it.