

CHAPTER LXX

DECORATIVE ART AT THE 'THOUSAND BUDDHAS'

As long as all my efforts had to be devoted to the search among the treasures of the hidden chapel, there was no time to spare for the closer inspection of the hundreds of temple grottoes, big and small, which honeycomb the precipitous conglomerate cliffs on the left river bank above and below Wang Tao-shih's shrine. But on occasional strolls along their line extending for nearly a mile I managed to familiarize myself with the position and character of the larger and more important cave-temples. So when my immediate task of 'excavation' came to an end with the Tao-shih's departure on May 31st, and I was left free to turn my attention to them, there was some preliminary acquaintance to guide me in my survey of their artistic features.

It did not take long to convince me that this survey would necessarily have to be of an eclectic nature, if I was to retain a sufficient margin of time for my other archaeological and geographical tasks of that summer. The total number of separate grottoes, varying in size from big cellas up to fifty-four feet in depth, with antechapels and porches, to miniature shrines of very modest dimensions, amounts to over five hundred, as ascertained in the course of the general site plan which I got the Surveyor to make with the plane-table. They fall roughly into three main groups, the largest of which, to the south, comprises all the caves still visited for worship. The photograph (Fig. 158) shows to the left the lower end of this group, beyond Wang Tao-shih's shrine, and to the right part of the second and much smaller group.