

oblong formed by the crumbling town walls. Compared with it Tun-huang seemed quite a thriving city. The town lies not far from the Su-lo Ho river, and at the eastern end of a compact stretch of cultivation, about a couple of miles wide, which forms the main oasis.

Luckily I was not obliged to seek shelter within its insalubrious precincts. Forewarned by Wang Ta-lao-ye of my tastes, Ên T'ai-tsin, the magistrate, had arranged for my quarters at a modest temple about half a mile outside the western gate. In its single hall I could store my cases in safety and seek protection from the fierce heat of the daytime, while a tiny orchard behind allowed my tent to be pitched in something like privacy to serve as my abode for the night. Close by was a tumble-down structure, which the good-natured priestly guardian of the temple kept usually under lock and key. It was full of coffins, big and small, with bodies awaiting transport to their ancestral homes in far-away provinces. Luckily I did not make the discovery until quite the end of my stay.

This, in spite of my eagerness to set out for the mountains, stretched out longer than I had first thought. The magistrate, a well-meaning though by no means brilliant person, quite exhausted himself in politeness, and in spite of a certain nervous air expressed himself ready to become responsible for the safe storage of my cases in his Ya-mên. But the provision of the transport needed for my move southward seemed a formidable affair, and I had not been long at An-hsi before I realised how very limited were the resources of the place in spite of its magistrate's high-sounding title. Apart from the struggling hamlets in the wide, scrub-covered plain, which was very slowly recovering from the terrible ravages of the Tungan inroads, the district in his immediate charge comprised but a few scattered villages far away in the foot-hills, where his orders had scant chance of being obeyed with promptness. I had also reason to believe that the Viceregal apprehension about the risks which I might cause by my excavations had, in spite of Wang's sensible representation of the true facts, left its impress on his timorous mind. I had avowed my intention of visiting