

river gorge, now turned into a cañon, which is known as Wang-fo-hsia, or the 'Valley of [the caves of] the Myriad Buddhas.' I knew well that, in spite of its grandiloquent name, this sacred site could not compare in importance with the 'Thousand Buddhas' of Tun-huang; but the singular wildness of the scene rendered the first impression most striking. Along both sides of the deep rift, only about 200 yards wide at its bottom, which the river coming from the snowy range above Shih-pao-chêng has cut through the hard conglomerate, the almost vertical cliffs showed the openings of temple grottoes extending for a distance of over a quarter of a mile (Fig. 213). A narrow strip of orchard and cultivation raised along a tiny canal at the bottom only heightened by contrast the effect of those frowning rock walls, more than a hundred feet high, and of the dark cavities piercing them.

On descending the precipitous footpath I was welcomed by three cheerful and well-fed Taoist priests, and soon found excellent quarters in the verandah of a patio-like court in front of the grotto containing a colossal seated Buddha, which is seen on the extreme right in the photograph of Fig. 214. It took hours to get our baggage carried down, and I used the time in the dusk for a rapid look round. The numerous small shrines and Stupas scattered along a raised terrace at the foot of the cliffs of the right bank seemed kept in fair repair, and everything bore the air of a religious establishment quite 'in being' and relatively well off in the matter of pious support. The place had evidently escaped the usual havoc from Tungan rebel bands, and the vicinity of well-to-do Mongols grazing in the mountains south probably helped the priests towards getting comfortable sustenance. What with the delightful coolness of the evening—we had now risen to about 6200 feet above the sea—and the music of the stream tossing in its rocky bed, it was pleasant enough to wait for dinner till midnight.

The next two days were busily used for the examination and photographing of the shrines. Though executed on a distinctly smaller scale, and probably commenced at a somewhat later date, they resembled the cave-temples of