

CHAPTER XV

THE TUN-HUANG OASIS AND ITS NORTHERN LIMES

SECTION I.—GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES OF THE LOWER SU-LO HO BASIN

First stay
at Tun-
huang.

IN Chapter LI of my Personal Narrative I have given a full account of the impressions I gathered during my first stay at Tun-huang, which a multitude of tasks, quite as much as the urgent need of rest for my men and beasts, made to extend from the 12th to the 22nd of March, 1907.¹ It was my first visit to ground having a purely Chinese population, and the experiences soon gained at Tun-huang prepared me for the difficulties with which I should have to contend in the course of my work there. The following chapters will show how it was possible for me, largely through a variety of fortunate circumstances, among which the devoted help of Chiang Ssü-yeh prominently deserves mention, to bring back from this archaeological venture results far more abundant than I could reasonably have hoped for. Among those difficulties there is one which requires specially to be emphasized at the outset, because it affects very closely the record I am able to give here of my explorations in Kan-su, and in particular of those in the Tun-huang region.

Want of
Sinologist
training.

I mean my complete lack of Sinologist training. It is true, as related in *Desert Cathay*, that I managed to acquire through constant practice with Chiang Ssü-yeh, ever ready to talk and enlighten, a modicum of conversational Chinese, in the Hunanese variety of the Mandarin, which in the end allowed me to transact simple practical business myself, and which with Chiang's help also proved useful for securing official goodwill and at times antiquarian clues. But the written language remained a sealed book for me. I have, perhaps, even more reason to regret this great disadvantage now when recording the results of my labours, because it prevents any attempt on my part to review, in a connected form, the history of the region which yielded the archaeological and other remains I have to describe.

Historical
records of
Tun-huang.

Tun-huang 敦煌, as the local Chinese, still clinging to the ancient Han name, best know the oasis which in our books and maps usually figures under the designation *Sha-chou* 沙州, the 'City of Sands', introduced in T'ang times, has played an important part throughout the periods when Chinese power and influence were effectively asserted in Central Asia. Even during times such as those following the decay of the empire under the later Chin and T'ang rulers, the continued existence in those westernmost marches of a Chinese administration under small local dynasties is attested.² Hence, the materials concerning the history of this frontier territory available in the dynastic Annals and in other Chinese records are likely to be sufficiently abundant. But only an insignificant portion of them has as yet become accessible in translations. This fact precludes any attempt on my part to preface the account of my explorations in this region by a sketch of its history from Chinese sources. Instead of making this attempt, I shall be content to use such Chinese historical notices as are accessible to me wherever they can directly throw light on archaeological or topographical points connected with my work. I shall have to observe the same limitation also as regards the territories further east to which my Kan-su explorations extended.

¹ See *Desert Cathay*, ii. pp. 9-38.

note 4; Chavannes, *Dix inscriptions*, pp. 80 sqq.

² Cf. M. Chavannes' note, *Ancient Khotan*, i. p. 543.