

Fortunately no such difficulty arises about the treatment of the main geographical facts which have had a determining influence on the history of the Tun-huang tract, and in particular explain its importance as the advanced base for the first expansion of Chinese political and military power westwards. Of these geographical facts I propose to present here a brief general survey based on what my own observations showed me. In regard to them, too, there were limitations imposed which may appropriately receive mention here. Owing to the extent of the desert ground which had to be explored for the sake of tracing the remains of the ancient Chinese Limes, the greater portion of the time I could devote to the Tun-huang region, three months in all, had to be spent far away from its inhabited parts. Most of the remainder was subsequently claimed by antiquarian tasks of absorbing interest and importance, which detained me for more than three weeks at the cave temples of *Chien-fo-tung* or the 'Thousand Buddhas', in the solitude of a true Thebaid. Thus, apart from the topographical facts which our surveys, as recorded in Map No. 78, supplied, I had little opportunity to examine closely the economic conditions of the cultivated area, its resources in population, irrigable land, water-supply, etc.

Geographi-
cal facts
about Tun-
huang.

But besides the limited time available there were other difficulties to contend with. A very serious one was created by the secretive reticence of the Chinese population, which invariably denied any and every answer to questions that could possibly be supposed to have a bearing on local interests, directly or indirectly. This attitude of suspicious reserve was even more pronounced in Tun-huang than elsewhere in Kan-su. It was probably fostered also by the strong particularist feeling which seemed to pervade the local population, and which made these descendants of the quondam guardians of the empire's western outpost distinctly difficult to handle. The confidential information on this subject which we received from Wang Ta-lao-yeh, the well-meaning and scholarly district magistrate, to whom I was indebted for much help, was borne out only too well by the outbreak of which he himself subsequently became the victim.³

Difficulties
of observa-
tion.

Another grave impediment to correct conclusions on these subjects arose directly from the results of the most recent of the historical cataclysms to which Tun-huang appears to have been always exposed, and from more than one quarter. Like most of the Kan-su tracts eastward, Tun-huang is but slowly recovering now from the effects of the terrible devastations which accompanied the last great rebellion of the Tungans, or Muhammadan Chinese, and which between the years 1862-73 in the Tun-huang region destroyed the greater part of the original population. The extensive ruins of abandoned homesteads and walled villages which were to be met with throughout the length and breadth of the oasis bore silent, but only too eloquent, evidence to the extent of the destruction wrought by that succession of murderous inroads. From the point of view of the historical student this evidence was instructive enough. But it is obvious that impressions, gathered after such a prolonged time of upheaval and unchecked by reliable local information, could not form an adequate base for gauging the present resources of the Tun-huang oasis, and still less those which it may have offered during earlier periods.

Devastation
of Tungan
rebellion.

These economic resources of Tun-huang must have had an important bearing upon the rôle which the oasis has played in the history of China's relations with Central Asia, and with the Tārīm Basin in particular. But essentially that rôle was determined by broad geographical facts connected with the position of Tun-huang in the great valley of the Su-lo Ho. By looking at any general map which shows Kan-su as well as the Central-Asian territories comprised in Chinese Turkestan⁴ it is easy to realize that the wide valley drained by the lower course of the Su-lo Ho

Route down
Su-lo Ho
Basin.

³ Cf. *Desert Cathay*, ii. pp. 35 sq., 41, 233, 294.

⁴ See e. g. the map on scale 1 : 4,200,000, reproduced in

vol. iii of the Report on Captain Roborovsky's expedition; also Stieler, *Atlas*, Map No. 64.