

Manuscripts
locked up
in place of
discovery.

several cart-loads. News of the discovery having reached distant Lan-chou, specimens of the manuscripts were asked for from provincial headquarters. Ultimately orders were supposed to have come from the Viceroy of Kan-su to restore the whole of the find to its original place of deposit. So now this strange hoard of undeciphered manuscripts was declared to be kept by the Tao-shih behind the carefully locked door with which the hidden recess had been provided since its first discovery.

Specimen
from find
produced.

In the absence of the priest it was impossible to pursue these preliminary inquiries further. But I lost no time in visiting the alleged place of discovery. Fortunately, the young Ho-shang's spiritual guide, a Tibetan monk then also away on a begging tour, had borrowed one of the manuscripts in order to give additional lustre to a little private chapel of his own that he had improvised at his temporary abode in the tumble-down pilgrims' rest-house. The young monk was persuaded by Chiang Ssü-yeh to bring us this specimen. It was a beautifully preserved roll of paper about 10 inches high, and, when we unfolded it in front of the original hiding-place, proved to be about 15 yards long. The paper, yellowish in tint, looked remarkably strong and fresh. But in a climate so dry and in a carefully sheltered hiding-place it was impossible to judge age from mere outward appearance, and with its fine texture and carefully smoothed surface it looked to me decidedly old.

Manuscript
roll of
Buddhist
Sūtra text.

Chiang Ssü-yeh had the same impression of the writing, which was very clear and showed excellent penmanship. It was, indeed, Chinese, and so beyond doubt was the language. But my learned secretary frankly acknowledged that on cursory reading he could not make out any connected sense in the text. This, however, soon found its explanation when, in frequently repeated formulas read out by Chiang, I recognized such words as *P'u-sa* and *p'o-lo-mi*, the familiar Chinese transcripts of Sanskrit *Bodhisattva* and *pāramitā*. I knew how utterly strange the phraseology of Chinese Buddhism is to the average *literator*, and there could be no possible doubt about the text being Buddhist even before Chiang Ssü-yeh, on the roll having been completely unfolded, had discovered that it was described in the colophon as a *ching* 經, or Sūtra. Thus the rapid inspection of this single specimen suggested that the reported great manuscript deposit might prove to be largely of Buddhist character. At the same time the fact that the text was written on a roll, and not in the 'concertina' or book form which has prevailed in China ever since block printing became common about the beginning of the Sung period (A.D. 960),¹ seemed to raise a strong presumption as to the early date of the deposit. All further speculation had to be put off until I should secure access to the whole of the hidden library. It was enough encouragement at the time to find its existence confirmed.

Endeavours
to gain
access to
deposit.

The thought of the great store of old manuscripts awaiting exploration drew me back to the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas with the strength of a hidden magnet. But by the time at which my return to the site became possible I had learned enough of the local conditions of Tun-huang to realize that there were good reasons for caution in my first endeavours to secure access to the Tao-shih's jealously guarded treasures. The fact alone that the cave-temples, notwithstanding all apparent decay, were still real places of worship 'in being' would, by every consideration of prudence, impose obvious limitations upon my archaeological activity there. But what my sagacious secretary had meanwhile gathered about the character and ways of the monk holding charge of that ancient hidden store was a further warning to me to feel my way at first with discretion and studied slowness. Chiang Ssü-yeh, however, had succeeded in inducing Wang Tao-shih to await my arrival at the caves instead of starting at once, when the great annual fête there had concluded, on one of his usual tours in the district to collect temple subscriptions, etc. It was encouraging, too,

¹ [Dr. L. Giles informs me that the earliest specimens of Sung printing in the British Museum are in 'concertina' form.]