

First sight  
of manu-  
script hoard.

It was a hot day, and no one stirring abroad, when accompanied by Chiang I went to the temple. There I found Wang Tao-shih evidently not yet quite relieved of his scruples and nervous apprehensions. But under the influence of that quasi-divine hint he now summoned up courage to open before me the rough door closing the narrow entrance which led from the north side of the passage or porch into the rock-carved recess (Fig. 200). The sight disclosed within made my eyes open wide. Heaped up in closely packed layers, but without any order, there appeared in the dim light of the priest's flickering lamp a solid mass of manuscript bundles rising to a height of nearly 10 feet. They filled, as subsequent measurement showed, close on 500 cubic feet, the size of the small room or chapel being about 9 feet square (Plate 43) and the area left clear within just sufficient for two people to stand in.

Necessity of  
caution.

It was obvious that any proper examination of the manuscripts would be impossible in this 'black hole', and also that the digging out for this purpose of all its contents would cost time and a good deal of physical labour. It would have been premature and worse than useless at the time to suggest clearing out all the bundles into the cella of the temple, where they might have been examined at ease; for Wang Tao-shih was still much oppressed by fears of losing his position and patrons, in fact all the hard-won results of his pious labours at the sacred site, in consequence of the rumours which any casual observers might spread against him in the oasis. Occasional pilgrims were likely to drop in even during this 'slack season' of the site, and it would have been imprudent for the Tao-shih to keep his shrine closed against such. All we could secure for the present was that he would take out a bundle or two at a time and let us look rapidly through their contents in a less cramped and dark part of the temple precincts. It was fortunate that the large antechapel, as restored by him, included a small room on either side provided with a door and paper-covered windows. So here a convenient 'reading-room' was close at hand for the old library, so strangely preserved, where Chiang and I were screened from any inquisitive eyes, even if an occasional worshipper came to 'kotow', ring a bell, and light his stick of incense before the big and ungainly statue of Buddha.

Discovery  
of walled-up  
chapel.

Before proceeding to give an account of the surprising 'finds' which that first rapid examination of 'specimen' bundles from the great deposit yielded, it will be convenient to record here some details about the hiding-place to which they owed their preservation, and also to state what indications could be gathered from it as to the origin and date of the deposit. From what Wang Tao-shih had told us it appeared that, when he first settled at Ch'ien-fo-tung some eight years before, he found the approach to this cave-temple almost completely covered with drift-sand. Judging from the condition of other caves close by and the relatively low level of this particular shrine, it is probable that the drift-sand which had accumulated behind the fallen rock débris of the antechapel area rose to 9 or 10 feet at the mouth of the entrance to the cella. As only a few labourers could be kept at work from the proceeds of pious donations coming at first dribble-like with lamentable slowness, it had taken two years or more to lay bare the whole of the wide passage, over 24 feet deep, and then to clear out the heavy masses of sand which had found their way into the cella. When this task had been accomplished, and while work was proceeding on the new statues which the Tao-shih was eager to set up, the labourers noticed a small crack in the frescoed passage wall to the right of the entrance. There appeared to be a brick wall behind the plastered surface instead of the solid conglomerate from which the cella and passage are hewn, and on breaking through this the small room, or side chapel, with its hidden deposit was discovered.

Inscription  
of A. D. 851  
found in  
chapel.

When the chapel was being searched—for valuables, no doubt, in the first place—there was found a fine slab of black marble, about 3 feet wide, set into the west wall of the room and bearing a long and neatly engraved Chinese inscription. The Tao-shih had it subsequently removed and