

Walled into the west face of the room had been found a large slab of black marble covered with a long and neatly engraved Chinese inscription. It had subsequently been removed and set up in a more accessible place on the left-hand wall of the passage. This inscription records imperial eulogies of a Chinese pilgrim named Hung-pien, who had visited India, and after returning with relics and sacred texts had apparently settled at these shrines to devote his remaining years to translating and other pious labours. As it is dated in the year corresponding to A.D. 851, it was clear to me from the first that the deposit of the manuscripts must have taken place some time after the middle of the ninth century.

But until we could find dated records among the manuscripts themselves there was no other indication of the lower date limit than the style of the frescoes which covered the passage walls. According to the Tao-shih's explicit assurance, borne out by the actual condition of the wall surface around the opening, mural painting had also covered the plaster in front of the latter. These frescoes, representing over-life-size Bodhisattvas marching in procession with offerings, were very well painted in a style met with again in numerous caves, the mural decorations of which had undergone no modern restoration, and appeared to me decidedly old. On various grounds it seemed improbable that they could be later than the period of the Sung dynasty, which immediately preceded the great Mongol conquest of the thirteenth century.

So there was evidence from the first to encourage my hopes that a search through this big hoard would reveal manuscripts of importance and interest. But the very hugeness of the deposit was bound to give rise to misgivings. Should we have time to eat our way through this mountain of ancient paper with any thoroughness? Would not the timorous priest, swayed by his worldly fears and possible spiritual scruples, be moved to close down his shell before I had been able to extract any of the pearls? There were reasons urging us to work with all possible energy and speed, and others rendering it advisable to display studied *insouciance* and calm assurance. Somehow we