‘Incidental’ Ethnographers
Studies in Christian Mission

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‘Incidental’ Ethnographers

French Catholic Missions on the Tonkin-Yunnan Frontier, 1880–1930

by

Jean Michaud
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FOREWORD

This book combines an interest in colonial history, French Catholic missions in and around northern Vietnam, and textual analysis. However, it is not the work of an historian, nor a missiologist, nor a literary specialist. In more ways than one, this study is a typical anthropology work. Arguably, anthropology can at times be described as a generalist discipline in the social sciences, never shy to mine neighbouring fields for their riches, from botany to philosophy. Anthropologists love to assemble multiple elements in eccentric jigsaws transgressing disciplinary boundaries. This book does just that while studying production of missionary ethnography on the highland minorities of northern French Indochina and southern Yunnan.

This book is thus situated at the junction of a number of established fields. But to this day, the texts explored in the next pages have largely been left unaddressed. Why? Because the place (on the margins of colonial Indochina), the peoples (mountain minorities), and the texts (penned by ‘amateurs’) all pertain to a subsidiary universe that, some would argue, was and remains of little historical, political, economic, and intellectual consequence.

It is true that practically all of the men who will take the front stage in the nine chapters that follow have remained minor historical characters, and that the fruit of their intellectual work, had it known the good fortune to be published, was not judged worthy of much interest by the specialists of the era. If I chose to devote a book—and a few years of my life—to them, clearly, it is because I challenge that label of inconsequentiality. As do a growing number of historians, linguists, and anthropologists today. My hope is that this constitutes only a first step to stimulate colleagues in a number of fields to dig deeper into the rich and original textual legacy of the authors brought to light here.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This book owes a lot to the intellectual contribution of many colleagues and friends. Though naming them all is an unrealistic task, a few ought not to remain anonymous: my partner and colleague Sarah Turner for decisive contributions at every stage of the book’s production, Desmond Manderson and Jackie Adcock for intellectual inspiration and constant encouragement, journal editors Bruce Lockhart and Colin McKerras for their important inputs to earlier versions of Chapters 5 and 6, Yves Goudineau and Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière for the chance to test my ideas with the participants to their graduate seminar at École des Hautes Études en Sciences sociales in Paris, and Agathe Larcher-Gosha and Christopher Gosha for insightful suggestions. Especially, I would like to thank Brian Heenan, Margaret Swain and Frédéric Laugrand for their helpful comments on earlier versions of the manuscript.

Father Gérard Moussay and Brigitte Appavou at the archives of Société des Missions étrangères de Paris, Lucette Vachier from Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, and staff of the documentation centre of École française d’Extrême-Orient in Paris have all earned my gratitude for their highly competent and dedicated assistance while searching archival material in France. Father Moussay’s gracious permission to include previously unpublished MEP photographs to this book is particularly appreciated.

Canadian graduate students François Fortin-Deschênes, Claire Tugault-Lafleur, Caroline Goulet, Marise Lachapelle and Priscilla Taché have all helped in skilfully preparing and putting together various parts of the manuscript. Laura Schoenberger has shown great patience and competence editing a final version of the text. Merci à toutes et tous!
And finally, series editor Marc Spindler, and Brill staff Mattie Kuiper and Ingeborg van der Laan, have been unfailing supporters of this project from its early stages and their diligent efforts have made the burden of delivery almost painless.
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1. Execution of MEP Bishop Pierre Borie (1808–1838) in Don-hoi (Tonkin), September 24, 1838. This colour painting is shown in the Martyr Room at the MEP Seminary in Paris, and is exemplary of the 19th century movement for the emulation of young recruits.

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