PART FOUR

MISSIONARY AUTHORS AND THEIR TEXTS
CHAPTER SEVEN

MISSIONARIES AND THEIR TEXTS

The stage is now set. The historical, political, and ideological background of the missionary as an agent of the religious establishment, but also an agent of the colonial state and an emissary of modernity, has been explored and made explicit. It is now time to meet individual MEP missionaries who most actively contributed to the ethnography of the highlands in the Upper Tonkin vicariate and adjacent parts of southwest China. This fourth section of the book is divided into two chapters that reflect a divide amongst these missionaries, namely between the trail blazers, and the next generation. Chapter 7 explores a sampling of missionary texts that are selected, put in context, and presented with an appraisal of their ethnographic value. These texts were produced roughly within 15 years of the creation of the Upper Tonkin vicariate, that is to say between 1895 and 1910. They exemplify missionary publications in the early stages of proselytizing in these mountains and among those remote peoples, when the frontrunners of the religious apparatus in these lands had virtually no one else to ask for help. After the 1910s, I argue, a second generation of missionaries took over from the path-breakers, a generation who could use the experiences and the language-training tools that their predecessors had left behind. This second generation, who started the production of a more mature, better rooted form of ethnographic writing, will be represented by three of its most distinguished spokespersons, Fathers Alfred Liétard, Paul Vial and François Marie Savina. But for now, the first steps.

Initially, the handful of missionaries joining the Upper Tonkin vicariate in 1895 had no understanding of the variety, let alone the exact identity, of the populations dwelling within the boundaries of their new mission. At best, some of the disembarking priests had perhaps—and I insist; perhaps—laid their eyes on some texts published by their lay forerunners or peers who had ventured into the mountains. Globally

1 This chapter is related to an article published in 2004 in the journal Asian Ethnicity (Vol. 5, number 2, pp. 179–194) and titled ‘Missionary Ethnographers in Upper Tonkin: The Early Years, 1895–1920.’ That article has been significantly edited here.